

AUTUMN

No. 993

THE  
CORNHILL

*Margaret Lane*

*Clive Bell*

*Betty Miller*

*Marris Murray*

★

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JOHN MURRAY

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Published in JANUARY,  
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8s. 6d. net

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# THE CORNHILL



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Autumn, 1952

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At present the CORNHILL appears quarterly and publishes occasional Supplements containing work of up to 35,000 words in length.

The Editor asks that all contributions should be addressed to him at 50 Albemarle Street, London, W.1, and accompanied by a stamped envelope.

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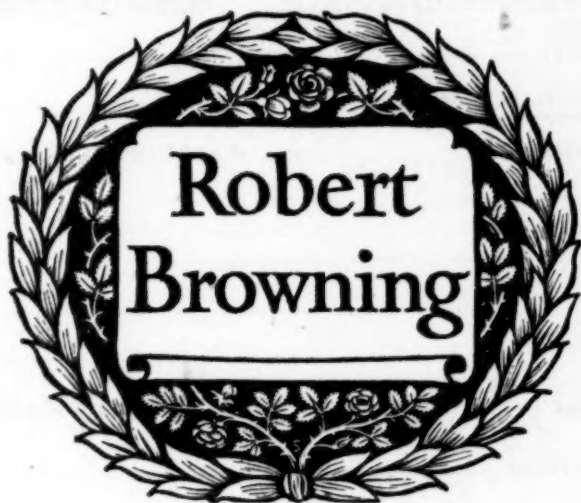
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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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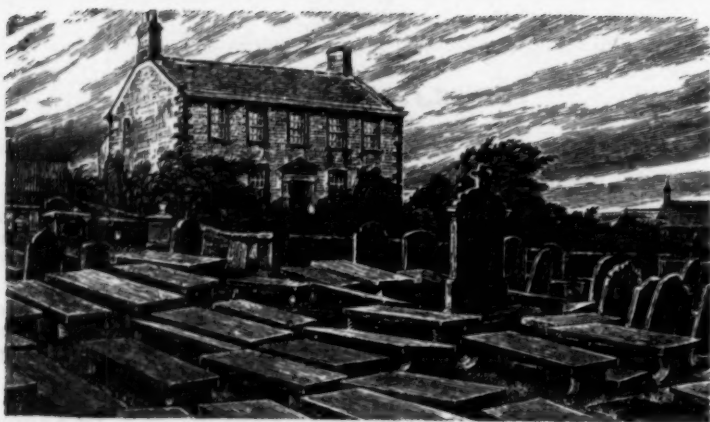
MARGARET LANE, novelist, biographer and journalist. Amongst her books are *Edgar Wallace*, *Where Helen Lies*, *Tale of Beatrix Potter*. She is now at work on *The Brontë Story*; a *Reconsideration of Mrs. Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë*.

CLIVE BELL, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, and Paris. Contributor to *The Athenæum*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *The Burlington Magazine*. Amongst his published books are *Art*; *Since Cezanne*; *Civilization*; *An Account of French Painting* (Chatto & Windus).

MARRIS MURRAY was born in the Transvaal and worked on the editorial staff of *The British Ally* during the war. Her first novel *The Fire Raisers* will be published by Secker & Warburg next spring.

BETTY MILLER, who is partly Swedish, was educated in Ireland, Sweden, France and England. Her novels include *A Room in Regent's Park*, *On the Side of the Angels*, *The Death of the Nightingale* (Hale). Her biography of Robert Browning entitled *Robert Browning: A Portrait* will be published this autumn by John Murray.

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## *The Hazards of Biography<sup>1</sup>*

*Mrs. Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë*

BY MARGARET LANE

*Illustrations by Joan Hassall*

WHEN Mrs. Gaskell arrived in Haworth one afternoon in July of 1855, she was taking the first step in an adventure of twofold importance. She was preparing to display to the world a hidden life, to compose the portrait of a woman of genius. Of this she was seriously aware. She was also (although she could not be sure of this) herself about to produce her literary masterpiece.

Only a few days before, she had received a letter from the Reverend Patrick Brontë, whose daughter Charlotte had died four months ago, at the age of thirty-nine. It had been a surprising letter, for in it Mr. Brontë had asked Mrs. Gaskell to write a biography, and had expressly said he would wish and expect her to publish it under her own name, 'so that the work might obtain a wide circulation and be handed down to the latest times.' Surprising, because the atmosphere of Haworth Parsonage, and of Charlotte Brontë's own life, had been one of reclusive quiet. She had shrunk, herself, even from the personal recognition which was a fruit of her fame; and the circumstances of her death had been

<sup>1</sup> A theme drawn from her work on *The Brontë Story*, to be published by William Heinemann Ltd.

so painful—still young, newly famous, married but nine months, pregnant with her first child—that Mrs. Gaskell may well have wondered that Mr. Brontë should choose to have Charlotte's life exposed to view.

It was even more extraordinary when one considered that Charlotte's husband, the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls, was a man of extreme reticence; one who, she suspected, did not particularly care for his wife's fame. She had never met Mr. Nicholls, but she seems to have had a faint distaste for him. What Charlotte had told her about him, before her marriage, had not been attractive. 'He is *not* intellectual,' she had said; '... he is a Puseyite and very stiff; I fear it will stand in the way of my intercourse with some of my friends.' And by that, naturally, Mrs. Gaskell had understood themselves, the Gaskells, who were Unitarians; for, as Charlotte had written in her undisguised sketch of Mr. Nicholls in *Shirley*, 'the circumstance of finding himself invited to tea with a dissenter would unhinge him for a week.' Yet here he was, mentioned in Mr. Brontë's letter as approving of the step, and being willing to supply Mrs. Gaskell with information. She may well have wondered, as the station fly crawled up the steep road from Keighley, what kind of hindrance as well as help, what veiled hostility or secretiveness would be waiting for her in the quiet parsonage.

Mrs. Gaskell had been in Haworth two years before, when Charlotte was alive, and she knew to the full how quiet the place could be. 'No one comes to the house,' she had written to a friend, after that first visit; 'nothing disturbs the deep repose; hardly a voice is heard; you catch the ticking of the clock in the kitchen, or the buzzing of a fly in the parlour, all over the house.' And Miss Brontë, who had so touched her imagination, had been alive then, so that the life of the house had flowed with a quiet pulse, and had been fed from the strange vitality that was hers, however still and absorbed she sat at the centre of it, making no sound. Whereas now, Charlotte lay under the pavement of Haworth Church; and in the parsonage, as Mrs. Gaskell knew, were only the stiff, black, unbending figures of those two clergymen, sitting aloof from one another in their different studies, writing their different sermons; '*ever near but ever separate*,' as the sexton said; with only their grief to bind them. What real help were they likely to give her, if she undertook this task? What difficult course would she have to steer among these hidden reefs, when she might be told so little and suspect so much?

#### THE HAZARDS OF BIOGRAPHY

As the horses plodded the winding road towards Haworth, approaching the precipitous cobbled gully which ended at the church, Mrs. Gaskell must have reflected on the five years of her friendship with Charlotte Brontë, and have realised—in spite of regrets for intimacies missed, in spite of the rocks ahead—that she had been offered a perfect subject. From the first moment of meeting Miss Brontë her imagination had wakened to a quivering interest, so that everything Miss Brontë had said or done, her home life, her childhood, her sisters, her father and brother, had been invested with that potent fascination which is the biographer's essential. Contact with Charlotte had fertilised an area of her mind. It had long, unconsciously, been ready for Mr. Brontë's request. The seeds were in it already.

She now had to deal with Mr. Brontë himself, and listen to his proposition, as well as to make acquaintance with Mr. Nicholls; and there may well have been some apprehension in her mind as she arrived at the parsonage. But the interview, though necessarily in that house of mourning delicate enough, seems to have been harmonious, and Mrs. Gaskell found it possible to discuss her most obvious difficulty. Would there be enough material for a life? Mr. Nicholls thought it doubtful. His wife's existence had, in his view, been uneventful; yet *Jane Eyre* having had the success it had and being the kind of book it was, he was aware that public curiosity about her would be intensely personal; and as he was a man of strong feelings, who had been deeply in love, he shrank with distaste from the thought of this literary prying. The whole vexed question of biography had, in fact, to be examined and decided at this first interview, with Mr. Nicholls representing the private interest—the husband, the widower, who had an aversion from private letters being made public and who preferred that nothing further should be said. Mrs. Gaskell, naturally, would take the opposite view; and justly; having a splendid piece of work to her hand and a perfect confidence in her own delicacy and honour. Charlotte Brontë would be safe with her, and they all knew it. The unexpected point of view, perhaps, was Mr. Brontë's; for Mrs. Gaskell had never thought him appreciative of Charlotte's genius or sympathetic as a father; yet it was his 'impetuous wish' that the biography should be written. Certainly, as the talk deepened through the summer afternoon, his characteristic blend of intellectual pride and personal vanity must gradually have emerged, touched by the pathos which was softening the harsh



outlines of his old age. He had been full of drive and ambition as a young man, and nothing had come of it but a handful of stillborn verse and pamphlets and his Sunday sermons. His only son, formed, as he believed, for the achievements of genius, had died in disgrace. All his five daughters were dead, and now, near the end of his life, he found himself alone with the Irish curate whom he had hated and despised, and whom at one time he had forbidden Charlotte to marry.

Into this drained life, however, had come a compensation. He had been slow to recognise it, but he now drew comfort and pleasure from Charlotte's fame. After her death, of course, he had adopted the conventional pose of preferring silence; but within a few months the inevitable had happened—articles were appearing in magazines which he liked even less than the thought of a biography. Once the idea had taken root (and the seed had been dropped by Ellen Nussey, Charlotte's lifelong friend, who had been affronted by an article in *Sharpe's Magazine* and had written to Mr. Nicholls to point out that if it went uncontradicted the public would be 'left to imbibe a tissue of malignant falsehoods') it developed at once into a dominating interest. So that he became unexpectedly Mrs. Gaskell's ally, and over-rode his son-in-law's objections; 'not perceiving,' as she told Miss Nussey, 'the full extent of the great interest in her personal history felt by strangers, but desirous above all things that her life should be written, and written by me.'

There were not many of Charlotte's letters in the house; only about a dozen, mostly written to her sister Emily, with one or two to her father and brother and one to her aunt. If Mr. Nicholls had kept the letters which Charlotte had written to him before their marriage, he did not disclose them. It was a poor beginning. There was, however, a source of material known to Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls to which Mrs. Gaskell was directed; and which proved so rich that it is doubtful whether, without it, her book could have been written. This was that same Ellen Nussey who had been Charlotte's friend since she was fifteen years old, and to whom she had written scores upon scores of letters. Indeed, for as long as Mr. Brontë and Mr. Nicholls could remember, whenever Charlotte had been found writing a letter, it was generally to Ellen; and the friendship had been so intimate and the letters so long that Mr. Nicholls had never felt quite easy about them. 'Arthur has just been glancing over this note,' Charlotte has added at the end of a letter to Ellen Nussey when she had been four



months married; 'He thinks I have written too freely. . . . Arthur says such letters as mine never ought to be kept, they are dangerous as lucifer matches, so be sure to follow a recommendation he has just given, "fire them" or "there will be no more," such is his resolve. I can't help laughing, this seems to me so funny.'

In Ellen Nussey, Mrs. Gaskell had a source of material and an eager helper such as fall to the lot of very few biographers. She was not in herself an interesting character, being neither remarkable nor particularly intelligent; but, perhaps because of her negative pliability, she had been an excellent confidante for Charlotte. She was affectionate; she was loyal; and she possessed those scrupulous Victorian virtues of truthfulness and delicacy which remain the most serviceable foundations of enduring friendship. Charlotte had loved her, though she had known her limitations, as those vital areas which are never approached in the letters bear silent witness; and round Charlotte, Ellen had gradually built up the greatest remaining interest of her life.

This life, like Mr. Brontë's, had become more than usually empty since Charlotte's death, and like him she focussed a personal and enthralled attention on the biography. She rushed at the subject with the unaffected, unintelligent piety which is the keynote of her nature. She hoped Mrs. Gaskell would undertake a 'just and honourable defence'; it was a 'righteous work' to vindicate 'dear C.,' and she would do everything in her power to forward it. 'I possess a great many letters,' she wrote, 'for I have destroyed but a small portion of the correspondence, but I fear the early letters are not such as to unfold the character of the writer except in a few points. You perhaps may discover more than is apparent to me. You will read them with a purpose—I perused them only with interests of affection.'

Mrs. Gaskell's eye was more penetrating than Miss Nussey's, her understanding deeper, her purpose mature; and as, during that autumn and winter, she read her way steadily through the parcels of Charlotte's letters, she began to see with marvellous clarity the sombre but fertile landscape through which her search would take her. By the turn of the year she was deeply engaged in her task.

In the spring and summer of 1856 Mrs. Gaskell made a number of journeys to places connected with Charlotte Brontë's life. She

spent a fortnight in Haworth, staying at the 'Black Bull' with her husband and conducting researches independently of the parsonage. She went to London, where she spent many hours with George Smith, Charlotte's publisher and friend, who furnished her with much information and who had been chosen, not unnaturally, to publish the biography. She also, conscious of the importance of this particular mission, went to Brussels. It was a summer spent in minutely feeling her subject, and discovering its variously smooth and prickly surfaces.

Her impression of Mr. Brontë, which was one of reclusive selfishness combined with a certain moral fearlessness and integrity, had been deepened by what she heard of him in the village; and she felt bound to describe him as truthfully as she dared because of his bearing on Charlotte's life and character. Uncomfortably conscious of his still alert presence in the parsonage, and of herself therefore, as Mary Taylor put it, 'not being at liberty to give a true description of those around,' she was often puzzled how to steer a successful course between truth and policy; and when she sent some tentative pages to Mr. Smith and Ellen Nussey in private, they both advised her to soften what she had written. 'I thought,' she wrote to Miss Nussey, 'that I carefully preserved the reader's respect of Mr. Brontë, while truth and the desire of doing justice to her compelled me to state the domestic peculiarities of her childhood.' But Mr. Smith had pencilled cautionary words in the margin which made her 'rather uncomfortable,' and Ellen Nussey had replied—having a long personal knowledge of Mr. Brontë and none of the publisher's experienced dread of what the reviewers might make of it—'I do not wish anything you have said suppressed, only I think your readers will have to be taught to think kindly of Mr. B. . . .'

Then there was Mr. Nicholls, who, while not being positively unhelpful, was, somehow, dry and unyielding. She guessed he had material which he did not wish to show, and his reserve and her good breeding being what they were, her delicacy quailed before him.

'Mr. N. ought to have no reserve with you,' Ellen Nussey wrote, 'his very affection should make him see it is wisest, best and kindest to tell the whole truth to you in everything that regards her literary life or her domestic virtues. . . . I hope you may be able to open his heart, he spoke in one of his notes to me last year of having implicit confidence in you. I think you may win him by your own

heartiness in the work—at any rate you will Mr. B., and for a quiet life Mr. N. will have to yield where Mr. B. is urgent and impatient.’ But would he? ‘It seems,’ wrote Mrs. Gaskell, ‘as if Mr. Brontë’s own consent or opinion on these matters had very little weight with Mr. Nicholls.’

The parsonage, in fact, was so rich a field for research that it could not be neglected; but it was also the thorniest area she had to work in. ‘I still,’ she told Ellen, ‘want one or two things to complete my materials, and I am very doubtful if I can get them—at any rate I think they will necessitate my going to Haworth again, and I am literally *afraid* of that.’ However, when she finally went she was unexpectedly fortunate, for she was accompanied by Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, who, like Mr. Clement Shorter nearly forty years later, was not inhibited by feelings of delicacy. Blunt methods, as it surprisingly turned out, were what were most successful with Mr. Nicholls. Sir James was a rich physician whose constructive interests were popular education and philanthropy, and whose harmless foible it was to wish to be thought intimate with literary celebrities. It was to indulge this vanity that he had assiduously entertained Mrs. Gaskell, and had forced his benevolent but undesired friendship on Charlotte Brontë. Now that Miss Brontë was dead he by no means relaxed his attention, for, as Mrs. Gaskell was quick to perceive, ‘Sir J. evidently wants to appear to the world in intimate connexion with her.’ He was not the most comfortable companion for such a visit, but his sledge-hammer methods succeeded where Mrs. Gaskell’s persuasive tact had failed. ‘He had not the slightest delicacy or scruple: and asked for an immense number of things, literally taking no refusal.’

Mrs. Gaskell was now in the full turmoil of her task, carried away on a tide of creative energy and excitement. She went up to her room ‘directly after 9 o’clock breakfast; and came down to lunch at  $\frac{1}{2}$  past 1, up again and write without allowing any temptation to carry me off till 5—or past; having just a run of a walk before 7 o’clock dinner. . . . I could not sleep for thinking of it.’

In describing the parsonage itself Mrs. Gaskell found no difficulty. It was modest; it was Spartan; but it was not unhomely. But describing Mr. Brontë was another matter. Mrs. Gaskell had known him, slightly, for several years; she had stayed in his house, where she had attentively observed the relations between Charlotte and her father; and the conclusion she had formed was that he

was an eccentric, domineering, selfish and irascible old man. She was not alone in this view, for Mary Taylor, Charlotte's lifelong friend who had known him since she was a girl, had written to Miss Nussey, 'I can never think without gloomy anger of Charlotte's sacrifices to the selfish old man;' and it is probable that Mrs. Gaskell had seen this letter. Besides, Charlotte had confided in Mrs. Gaskell during the painful time before her father had consented to her marriage; and though Charlotte had never blamed him, and had been torn through the whole affair between guilt and duty, Mrs. Gaskell had seen easily enough through her harassed loyalty to the discreditable background of his selfishness. The solitary habits, too, which had grown on him with age, and the authoritarian atmosphere of his presence had deepened her first impression; and she had found that, while not actually disliked (since he kept so much to himself and never interfered with his parishioners) he was very far from popular in the village.

During her first visit to Haworth, when Charlotte was alive, she had naturally talked to the daughter about the father, and from her, sitting over the parlour fire in the evening, had learned much. 'Mr. Brontë,' she had written to a friend, as soon as she was home again, 'lives almost entirely in the room opposite. . . . We dined—she and I together—Mr. Brontë having his dinner sent to him in his sitting-room according to his invariable custom (fancy it! and only they two left). . . . He is a tall fine-looking old man . . . nearly blind; speaking with a strong Scotch accent (he comes from the North of Ireland), raised himself from the ranks of a poor farmer's son—and was rather intimate with Lord Palmerston at Cambridge, a pleasant soothing reflection now, in his shut-out life. There was not a sign of engraving, map, writing materials, beyond a desk, etc., no books but those contained on two hanging shelves between the windows—his two pipes, etc., a spittoon, if you know what that is.' He was, she said, 'much respected and to be respected. But he ought never to have married. He did not like children; and they had six in six years, and the consequent pinching and family disorder—which can't be helped), and noise, etc., made him shut himself up and want no companionship—nay be positively annoyed by it. . . . Moreover to account for my fear—rather an admiring fear after all—of Mr. Brontë, please take into account that Miss Brontë never remembers her father dressing himself in the morning without putting a loaded pistol in his pocket, just as regularly as he puts on his watch. There was this

little deadly pistol sitting down to breakfast with us, kneeling down to prayers at night to say nothing of a loaded gun hanging up on high, ready to pop off on the slightest emergency.'

In her search for material Mrs. Gaskell seems not to have paid much attention to Martha Brown, the servant at the parsonage ; nor, in particular, to have questioned her at all about Mr. Brontë. It is possible that she never thought of it, but more likely that she avoided this obvious course out of a feeling of delicacy. It would not have been easy, after listening to Mr. Brontë in the parlour, to have gone for corroboration to the kitchen. But it is a pity, after all, that she did not ; for it seems quite certain that Mr. Brontë was a more sympathetic character than she knew ; that there was a genial and touching as well as a harsh side to his nature, and that Martha was aware of this. Mrs. Gaskell, however, prompted perhaps by her desire to know more of those early years before ever Martha Brown had come to the parsonage, took as her informant a 'good old woman' who had been day-nurse to Mrs. Brontë in her last illness, and whom she must have been delighted to find still alive and in Haworth, and apparently in excellent memory. This old woman related anecdotes of Mr. Brontë's early married life which, in their very violence and oddity seemed to fit in so perfectly with what Mrs. Gaskell conceived to be his character that she never questioned them. One sees that it would have been difficult to interrogate Mr. Brontë, since the anecdotes were so little to his credit ; but one is startled by the recklessness with which Mrs. Gaskell adopted them. There seems little doubt that by her unconscious selection of evidence she created a legend about Charlotte Brontë's father which, after the manner of legends, contains more of poetic than of actual truth. She seems to have done him less than justice ; to have made him more picturesque and less understandable than he really was ; and yet to have drawn a portrait which, for all its over-dramatic chiaroscuro, conveys an impression of mass and outline which one feels is true.

Mrs. Gaskell has been much criticised, and even discredited, for her account of the character and behaviour of Mr. Brontë. Was she misled, was she malicious, or did she tell the truth ? It is quite certain, at least, that she *believed* she was telling the truth ; she had drawn much of her information from Charlotte herself ; and if she was at all uneasy at the thought of Mr. Brontë's possible annoyance at what she had written, her apprehensions were soothed at first by his reception of it. 'I thank you,' he wrote to Mrs.



Gaskell in 1857, when she had sent him the published biography, 'for the books you have sent me containing the Memoir of my daughter. I have perused them with a degree of pleasure and pain which can be known only to myself. . . . You have not only given a picture of my dear daughter Charlotte, but of my dear wife, and all my dear children and such a picture, too, as is full of truth and life. The picture of my brilliant and unhappy son, and his diabolical seducer, is a masterpiece. Indeed, all the pictures in the work have vigorous, truthful, and delicate touches in them, which could have been executed only by a skilful female hand.'

Mrs. Gaskell must have read this letter with sensations of relief, and even with a gratified surprise, for there were many fathers who, however well they might confront the truth about themselves, would have cavilled at her candour about Branwell. But no; Mr. Brontë apparently was pleased, and sounded only the mildest note of criticism when he added, 'There are a few trifling mistakes, which, should it be deemed necessary, may be corrected in the second edition.' A few days later he explained, 'The principal mistake in the memoir which I wish to mention is that which states that I laid my daughters under restriction with regard to their diet, obliging them to live chiefly on vegetable food. This I never did.' He had always, he said, knowing his children to be delicate, advised them to wear flannel and to eat as much meat as they could. He particularly wished this to be mentioned in the second edition; and he added in a postscript (as being perhaps of less importance) 'The Eccentric Movements ascribed to me, at pages 51 and 52, Vol. I—have no foundation in fact.'

This was in April, and the letter is placid enough; but by July the tone has become more anxious, Mr. Brontë meanwhile having been considerably annoyed by the officiousness of a Mr. William Dearden, who had been an acquaintance of Branwell's, and who had written a defence of Mr. Brontë in the *Halifax Examiner* which contradicted very nearly everything that Mrs. Gaskell had said. 'I did not know,' he represented Mr. Brontë as having said to him, 'that I had an enemy in the world; much less one who would traduce me before my death. Everything in that book which relates to my conduct to my family is either false or distorted. I never committed such acts as are there ascribed to me.' This article had been written and published without Mr. Brontë's knowledge, though he admitted to Mrs. Gaskell that Mr. Dearden had 'call'd on me to make enquiries,' and that he, Mr. Brontë,

'had spoken in the highest terms of the Memoir, mentioning, however, that there were a few statements respecting myself that were erroneous, and which I wish to have omitted in the Third Edition.' (The second had already appeared.) He had never said anything 'intimating in the remotest degree that I considered you an enemy.'

Mr. Brontë was clearly upset by this superfluous defence, and all his letters to Mrs. Gaskell at this time prove that, whoever may have been making angry protests against her treatment of him, it was not himself. He wanted some far-fetched anecdotes corrected, but for the rest he was quite willing to admit that he had faults. 'I do not deny that I am somewhat eccentric. Had I been numbered amongst the calm, sedate, concentric men of the world, I should not have been as I now am, and I should in all probability never have had such children as mine have been. . . . Only don't set me on in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs of chairs, and tearing my wife's silk gowns.' His tone, throughout the whole of this interesting correspondence, is one of tolerance and reasonableness; he is concerned for truth, but beyond that never questions Mrs. Gaskell's right to her interpretations. 'I am not in the least offended at your telling me that I have faults; I have many—and, being a Daughter of Eve, I doubt not that you also have some. Let us both try to be wiser and better as Time recedes and Eternity advances.'

Did he bring up his children on potatoes, as Mrs. Gaskell (and later biographers) believed? Why, no, it seems that they had roasts like other people; though perhaps not very many, since their means were small. And Charlotte at least, in her younger days, seems to have been by preference a vegetarian. 'Her appetite,' said Ellen Nussey, writing her recollections of Charlotte as a schoolgirl, 'was of the smallest; for years she had not tasted animal food; she had the greatest dislike to it; she always had something specially provided for her at our midday repast. Towards the close of the first half-year she was induced to take, by little and little, meat gravy with vegetable, and in the second half-year she commenced taking a very small portion of animal food daily.' And in a fragment of a diary which Emily and Anne kept together when they were young girls we find, 'It is past twelve o'clock. . . . We are going to have for dinner Boiled Beef, Turnips, Potatoes and apple pudding.' So it was evidently Charlotte's vegetarian tendencies which had led Mrs. Gaskell



astray ; and in her account of Mr. Brontë's pistol shooting we find about the same degree of inexactness.

According to Mrs. Gaskell, he had been in the habit of working off his 'volcanic wrath' by firing pistols out of the back door in rapid succession. This, says Mr. Dearden, claiming to speak for Mr. Brontë, is, together with the burning of the hearthrug and the sawing up of the chairs, nothing but a 'tissue of falsehoods.' About the chairs and the hearthrug we shall never know ; the stories have an air of distortion about them which inclines one to think that they are perhaps untrue. But about the pistols there is no doubt : Mr. Brontë loved firearms and always carried them ; and Ellen Nussey, in a description which she wrote in middle-age of her first visit to Haworth, remembers Mr. Brontë's daily firing of pistols, and gives an explanation. 'Every morning was heard the firing of a pistol from Mr. Brontë's room window—it was the discharging of the loading which was made every night. Mr. Brontë's tastes led him to delight in the perusal of battle scenes, and in following the artifice of war ; had he entered on military service instead of ecclesiastical, he would probably have had a very distinguished career. . . .' So no doubt Mr. Brontë discharged his pistols sometimes in an irritable mood, for he seems to have been a man of quick temper, though generally well controlled, and, in his later years, protected by solitary habits from provocation. Not, we are bound to conclude, a comfortable man to live with ; for even Mr. Dearden's account of the silk gown episode, supplied by Nancy Garrs, the Brontë's servant, has a disconcerting flavour. It was not a silk gown, he insists, but a print one ; and the only thing that Mr. Brontë objected to was the shape of the sleeves ; and it was only the sleeves that Mr. Brontë had cut off, when he found the dress in his wife's bedroom ; and Mrs. Brontë had showed the mutilated dress to Nancy in the kitchen, 'laughing heartily.' It may have been a joke ; but it does not stand high as a domestic pleasantry ; and Mr. Dearden's defence has the unintentional effect of convincing us of the sweet temper of Mrs. Brontë.

The truth about Mr. Brontë seems to lie, as truth usually does, in that interesting middle ground between two points of view. He is not an altogether sympathetic character, being too aloof, spartan, and, in a sense, unimaginative (in spite of the poems) to evoke much response ; too far gone in the unconscious selfishness of the recluse to have any attraction for an affectionate and social temper like Mrs. Gaskell's. But he is not entirely harsh ; he would

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have gone through life without criticism if he had not inadvertently begotten children of genius ; and it is almost impossible, as one follows the fortunes of the family, not to feel a slightly irritable fondness for Mr. Brontë.



Arriving at that point in her narrative where Charlotte's first experience of school must be considered, Mrs. Gaskell, most justifiably, paused : for here she was entering on controversial and dangerous ground, and knew she must be careful. The Clergy Daughters' School, at Cowan Bridge, to which Mr. Brontë had sent his four little girls, had provided Charlotte with some of the deepest emotional experiences of her childhood ; and in writing *Jane Eyre* she had drawn on her memory of the miseries of eight years old. Lowood, the orphan asylum in *Jane Eyre*, administered by a ' black marble clergyman ' who admonishes the children with stories of death-beds and hell, and who is so attentive to frugal detail that he chooses the darning needles himself and inspects the holes in stockings hanging on the line, is a cold, hungry, comfortless place, where the girls suffer much from severity and privation, and where numbers of them die.

Aware that her account of Cowan Bridge School, however careful, would be open to criticism, Mrs. Gaskell had made a special journey to inspect the building which the Rev. Carus Wilson, the founder, had enlarged and converted from a row of humble dwellings into a school, and which was now—or what was left of it—partly an untenanted public-house and partly a cottage. She had gone into

the building, one end of which was almost derelict, 'having all the squalid appearance of a deserted place, which rendered it difficult to judge what it would look like when neatly kept up.' The other end, now a cottage, had still 'the low ceilings and stone floors of a hundred years ago; the windows do not open freely and widely; and the passage up-stairs, leading to the bedrooms, is narrow and tortuous; altogether, smells would linger about the house, and damp cling to it. But sanitary matters were little understood thirty years ago; and it was a great thing to get a roomy building close to the high road, and not too far from the habitation of Mr. Wilson, the originator of the educational scheme.'

Her moving account of Charlotte's ten months at Cowan Bridge, based as it was on what she had learned from Charlotte herself, scrupulously weighed and checked against what she heard from old pupils who had been at the Clergy Daughters' School at the same time, and who from their own memories augmented what she already knew of Maria Brontë, nevertheless started an ominous crackle of controversy, which spread and grew louder in the first weeks after publication until it threatened to develop into a dangerous blaze. Mr. Carus Wilson's son wrote indignant and complaining letters, both to Charlotte Brontë's husband and to the newspapers, quoting from the sympathetic letters which, he claimed, had been received by his family in great numbers, protesting that Mrs. Gaskell's account of the school was unjustified, and that her portrait of Mr. Wilson was a slander on a noble, conscientious, charitable and well-loved clergyman. Mr. Nicholls, surprisingly, came out of his customary silence, and in defence of Mrs. Gaskell and his wife engaged in a long and spirited exchange of letters in *The Halifax Guardian*. Old pupils of Cowan Bridge offered their testimony on both sides, and the vehemence of Mr. Carus Wilson's supporters (who were preparing a 'vindication') was so great, and their threat of a libel action so alarming, that Mrs. Gaskell's publishers thought it prudent to soften the harshness of her account in the next edition. Accordingly, but reluctantly (for she was convinced of the truth of all that she had said) Mrs. Gaskell bent to the storm, and the third edition appeared with a number of passages cut out and a paragraph or two added in cautious justification of Mr. Wilson.

That version of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* which is published today is, fortunately, the first. Time has gradually obliterated the indignation of the Carus Wilsons; it is Mrs. Gaskell's description

that remains. But did she, so far as we can ever be certain, speak the truth? We cannot be certain: yet it seems, it really seems, as though she did; or at least that she faithfully drew one profile of a face which may have had other aspects; had she seen these, they might have softened the cruelty of her single impression. Mrs. Gaskell's book, unlike *Jane Eyre*, is a record and an interpretation of fact; and although the evidence on both sides is positive and copious, the opposing parties flatly contradicting one another, it does not seem true that she has been seriously unjust.

It is true that discipline and privations would make a deeper and more bitter impression on a sickly and imaginative child than on one naturally cheerful and robust; it is also true that the motives which Mr. Wilson thought he pursued, and the principles which he believed he upheld, are in themselves good. But Carus Wilson seems to have been a man deeply self-deceived, a neurotic obsessed with power, going about his chastening work with all the innocent zeal of the unconscious sadist. His little tracts are full of whippings and death-beds and the wrath of God suddenly and justly visited on children. Mr. Wilson's God is a swift admonisher and punisher, a God whose hell is always busy and full. In following Him, he served a deity very much to his liking, in the happy certainty that he had a moral excuse for every stringency and discipline. It was only unlucky for him that at the beginning he had among the Clergy Daughters a still, quiet, abnormally sensitive child of eight who would never forgive him, and who took most woundingly to heart a meanness in management and a rigour of discipline which left no mark on some of the other children.

The truthfulness of that child's evidence against Mr. Wilson and his institution seems to be supported by the first prospectus of the Clergy Daughters' School, several copies of which are still in existence. It was circulated by Mr. Carus Wilson when the school opened in the spring of 1824, the year in which the little Brontës were sent there, and we may conclude that Mrs. Gaskell never saw a copy, since she took her particulars of the school from the entrance rules given in the Governors' Report of eighteen years later. This prospectus on two points is unexpectedly illuminating—the extent to which Cowan Bridge was a family concern, providing niches and salaries for male and female Wilsons; and the possible identity of 'Miss Scatterd,' whose real name Mrs. Gaskell was 'merciful enough not to disclose,' and whose shadow falls across the printed sheet in the person of 'Miss Finch, Singing and Scourgemistress.'

We do not know whether Miss Finch was the original of Miss Scatcherd, but the presence of a Scourgemistress is significant in our estimate of the character of the place.

Another document which unintentionally hints at the conditions prevailing at Cowan Bridge during that first year is the school register; and this, again, we may suppose that Mrs. Gaskell never saw, since she made no use of the interesting material it contained, and nowhere refers to it. Later biographers have drawn on those extracts which were printed in the *Journal of Education* in 1900, and which give particulars of the Brontë sisters themselves—('Charlotte Brontë. Entered August 10, 1824. Writes indifferently. Ciphers a little and works neatly. Knows nothing of grammar, geography, history, or accomplishments. Altogether clever of her age, but knows nothing systematically. Left school June 1, 1825. Governess')—but none seems to have examined any other part of the book, or to have noticed that the number of deaths and withdrawals during the first eighteen months is so high as to suggest that something was seriously amiss.

From the register, then, we find that seventy-seven children were entered at Cowan Bridge in the first two years, and that by the end of the second year twenty-eight of the number had been removed. One, as we see from a brief entry, died at Cowan Bridge. Three, including Maria and Elizabeth Brontë, 'left school in ill health and died in a decline.' One 'left school in ill health, 13th February, died April 28th, 1825.' Another 'left school in ill health 3rd September 1825,' and another 'left on account of ill health which incapacitated her from further study.' Another 'went home in good health April 2nd, 1825, died of typhus fever April 23rd.' Of the remaining twenty who were removed it is recorded simply that they 'left.' Charlotte and Emily Brontë were among these, and since children do not leave school in such numbers without good reason it seems fair to conclude that there was something approaching panic among the parents.

The Clergy Daughters' School undoubtedly improved as time went on, and even at the beginning it is possible that the school and its founder were less bad than Mrs. Gaskell believed or Charlotte Brontë remembered: but when all is said they seem to have been horrible enough.





*Stonegappe*

'I now think,' wrote Mrs. Gaskell to Ellen Nussey, before she began her life of Charlotte, 'I have been everywhere where she ever lived, except of course her two little pieces of private governess-ship.' Why 'Of course'? Perhaps because Charlotte's experience as a nursery governess, important because of the fruit it eventually bore in *Jane Eyre*, was in fact extremely brief: she was two months with Mrs. Sidgwick as a 'temporary,' and less than nine months with Mrs. White. Also, Mrs. Gaskell may well have felt that no good could come of interviewing the Whites or the Sidgwicks: Charlotte and Anne had published their opinion of the employers of governesses, and Charlotte in her letters had been even more outspoken. Mrs. Gaskell clearly felt that here was an occasion for delicate avoidance.

'I intend carefully to abstain from introducing the names of any living people, respecting whom I may have to tell unpleasant truths, or to quote severe remarks from Miss Brontë's letters; but it is necessary that the difficulties she had to encounter in her various phases of life, should be fairly and frankly made known, before the force "of what was resisted" can be at all understood.'

As with Cowan Bridge, there has been no lack of defenders of Charlotte Brontë's employers, and there are some convincing scraps of evidence that Charlotte was a difficult governess, constrained, melancholy, ill at ease, and perpetually on the defensive. There can be no possible doubt that all three sisters were by temperament

and physique totally unsuited to the livelihood they had chosen. But when this is said, and the subjective nature of much of their suffering remembered, there remains a weight of blame which must fairly be laid at the door of the Whites, the Blakes, the Robinsons and the Sidgwicks.

'I see more clearly than I have ever done before,' Charlotte wrote from Stonegappe to Emily, 'that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living rational being, except as connected with the wearisome duties she has to fulfil. . . . One of the pleasantest afternoons I have spent here—indeed, the only one at all pleasant—was when Mr. Sidgwick walked out with his children, and I had orders to follow a little behind. As he strolled on through his fields, with his magnificent Newfoundland dog at his side, he looked very like what a frank, wealthy, Conservative gentleman ought to be. He spoke freely and unaffectedly to the people he met, and, though he indulged his children and allowed them to tease himself far too much, he would not suffer them grossly to insult others. . . .'

In this connection it is interesting to hear the Sidgwicks' version from the recollections of A. C. Benson, son of Archbishop Benson and one of the Sidgwicks' many cousins, who was often at Stonegappe. 'She was, according to her own account, very unkindly treated, but it is clear that she had no gifts for the management of children, and was also in a very morbid condition the whole time. My cousin Benson Sidgwick, now vicar of Ashby Parva, certainly on one occasion threw a Bible at Miss Brontë! and all that another cousin can recollect of her is that if she was invited to walk to church with them, she thought she was being ordered about like a slave; if she was not invited, she imagined she was excluded from the family circle.' Clearly a prickly and difficult person to have in the house, miserably lacking that serviceable outer skin with which the more resilient extrovert is provided.

When Mrs. Gaskell, in the course of her story, reached the point of Charlotte's final return from Brussels, she paused, considering the dangerous pitfalls opening before her. For here lay not only a secret, but a scandal. The unhappy secret she had already divined, when M. Heger had shown her Charlotte's letters and Mme Heger had strangely refused to see her. The scandal of Branwell's disgrace she had learned, too, partly from what Charlotte



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had told her, but chiefly from Charlotte's candid letters to Ellen. It was a shocking story, and Mrs. Gaskell's moral fastidiousness made her particularly sensitive to its undertones. How were these two matters to be dealt with? Both were of great importance in Charlotte's life; both, since other people concerned were still alive, were dangerous. 'I did so try to tell the truth,' she wrote, after the book was published and the scandalous parts had yielded their harvest of trouble. 'I weighed every line with my whole power and heart.' The conclusion she reached after this heart-searching was that M. Heger's story must never be told, but that Branwell's downfall was known to many and could not be disguised.

'I suffered much,' Charlotte had told Ellen, 'before I left Brussels. I think, however long I live, I shall not forget what the parting with M. Heger cost me; it grieved me so much to grieve him, who has been so true, kind and disinterested a friend.' That Charlotte's mind, sick with loneliness and depression, was already dangerously occupied with this fascinating man, cannot be denied; but there is nothing to suggest that she was yet awake to the true nature of her predicament. Her falling in love seems to have followed a devious, gradual and subterranean course, unrecognised (except, perhaps, by Mme Heger) until she had said good-bye to the professor for ever. She saw herself in all innocence as a devoted pupil who owed gratitude, loyalty, friendship—every emotion short of love—to the teacher who had provided her first intellectual satisfactions. To the fact that he was also a man of compelling personality, only a few years older than herself, she seems at this time to have been curiously blind. When she awoke, at Haworth, to her real plight, it was too late to change. The damage was done.

The period following her return from Brussels was one of emptiness and depression. Her eyesight during the past few months had become so bad that she was no longer able to read, and even the powerful solace of writing was denied her. The days dragged by in a kind of dreadful vacancy. 'There is nothing I fear so much as idleness,' she wrote to M. Heger, 'the want of occupation, inactivity, the lethargy of faculties . . . I should not know this lethargy if I could write. Formerly I passed whole days and weeks and months in writing, not wholly without result . . . but now my sight is too weak to write. Were I to write much I should become blind.' Anxiety kept creeping into her letters to him, however she tried to force a cheerful tone. Anxiety that he would

not reply, anxiety that he would scold her when he did ; the things she longed to say must never be said. In the course of a few months' separation from him a mysterious process of the mind had taken place in her ; her feelings had increased with absence and with vacancy ; his image had become more powerful and obsessive than when she had left Brussels. She waited for his letters with the troubled longing of a woman who knows at last that she is in love.

At first M. Heger replied—sensible, bracing letters at long intervals, intended to do her good. He was eager, later, that Mrs. Gaskell should see these letters—as an antidote, perhaps, to Charlotte's own. They had contained, he told her, advice on her character and life, her work and future ; they were letters, evidently, which should show beyond doubt his unexceptionable attitude. But they were not to be found ; either Charlotte herself or Mr. Nicholls had destroyed them. Only four of Charlotte's letters survived, and from these he allowed Mrs. Gaskell to make extracts—not wholly grasping, perhaps, the naked misery of the passages she was too discreet to quote. These four letters cover a period of sixteen months, in which he had bidden her write to him not more than twice a year, and in which he himself had been sparing of his answers. 'Once more goodbye, Monsieur,' Charlotte had written ; 'it hurts to say goodbye even in a letter. Oh, it is certain that I shall see you again one day—it must be so—for as soon as I shall have earned enough money to go to Brussels I shall go there—and I shall see you again if only for a moment.' Six months of silence on his part had followed this indiscretion, and when next she wrote it was with an urgency of appeal which convinced him of the wisdom of not answering.

The suffering, now, was not concealed. For all her efforts at control, for all her attempts to keep to everyday matters which could not displease him, her letters are so bursting with anguish that one cannot read them, even now, without wincing. 'Monsieur, the poor have not need of much to sustain them—they ask only for the crumbs that fall from the rich men's table. But if they are refused they die of hunger. Nor do I, either, need much affection from those I love . . . But you showed me of yore a *little* interest, when I was your pupil in Brussels, and I hold on to the maintenance of that *little* interest—I hold on to it as I would hold on to life.' Nearly a year later, still compelling herself to the long six-monthly intervals, the cry was still the same. 'I tell

you frankly that I have tried meanwhile to forget you . . . I have done everything ; I have sought occupations ; I have denied myself absolutely the pleasure of speaking about you—even to Emily ; but I have been able to conquer neither my regrets nor my impatience. . . . Your last letter was stay and prop to me—nourishment to me for half a year. Now I need another and you will give it me ; not because you bear me friendship—you cannot have much—but because you are compassionate of soul and you would condemn no-one to prolonged suffering to save yourself a few moments' trouble. To forbid me to write to you, to refuse to answer me, would be to tear from me my only joy on earth, to deprive me of my last privilege.' To this last letter, written, like all the others, in French, she added in English, ' Farewell, my dear Master—may God protect you with special care and crown you with peculiar blessings.' To this his answer appears to have been silence.

The history of these four letters of Charlotte's is very curious. Mlle Louise Heger, who with her brother presented them to the British Museum in 1913, seventeen years after their father's death, stated that he had torn up all Charlotte's letters as he received them and thrown them in the waste-paper basket. Here, the four of them that survive were found and retrieved by Mme Heger, who pasted the pieces together and hid them in her jewel case, where M. Heger found them many years later, after his wife's death. Surprised by the discovery, he threw them away again, and this time they were rescued by his daughter, who eventually in her old age decided they were of interest to posterity. There is only one flaw in this peculiarly interesting story. How, if M. Heger threw the letters away as he received them, could he show them to Mrs. Gaskell ten years later ? Either he kept them, or he must have shown them in the patchwork condition to which his wife had restored them. It is not perhaps a point of much importance, but is interesting for the light it throws on Mme Heger, who in this episode plays a part so perfectly in the character of Mme Beck.

However M. Heger regarded the letters, Mrs. Gaskell saw at once that they were dangerous ; of great significance to the biographer, but impossible to quote. ' I believed him to be too good to publish those letters,' she wrote to Ellen Nussey, '—but I felt that his friends might really with some justice urge him to do so.' For herself, of course, working under the watchful eye of Mr. Nicholls, any reference was out of the question. She wisely decided

on silence, and contented herself with quoting two harmless paragraphs which gave no clue to the underlying conflict.

For Charlotte, however, the experience was agonising and prolonged, and had to be endured, like all histories of unrequited love, until time and suffering wore it out at last. She told no one. Only in the four letters concealed in Mme Heger's jewel-case, and in one or two scraps of verse that she omitted to destroy, is there any clue to the painful and maturing experience from which her imagination purged itself at last with the writing of *Villette*.

When Mrs. Gaskell approached the shocking subject of Branwell's love-affair, it did not occur to her that the story might bear an interpretation quite different from Charlotte's, Mr. Brontë's, and her own. Much has been written and argued about this miserable episode, and it seems likely that, at this distance, we can never know the truth. Was Branwell really Mrs. Robinson's lover, or did his infatuation for her, and his drink and opium-muddled grief, delude him into imagining it? His father and sisters believed his story, and Mrs. Gaskell, accepting the evidence of Charlotte's letters and Ellen's recollections, took Mrs. Robinson's misconduct for granted, and told the tale in such sepulchral tones that her readers were left without a possibility of doubt.

Mrs. Gaskell's indignation with Mrs. Robinson (an indignation inspired, it must be said, by all she had heard from Charlotte and Mr. Brontë) moved her to a denunciation in the righteous and ringing tones of melodrama. 'The man became the victim; the man's life was blighted, and crushed out of him by suffering, and guilt entailed by guilt; the man's family were stung by keenest shame. The woman . . . she goes flaunting about to this day in respectable society; a showy woman for her age; kept afloat by her reputed wealth. I see her name in county papers, as one of those who patronise the Christmas balls; and I hear of her in London drawing-rooms. Now let us read, not merely of the suffering of her guilty accomplice, but of the misery she caused to innocent victims, whose premature deaths may, in part, be laid at her door.'

The libel action with which Mrs. Robinson's solicitors threatened Mrs. Gaskell, and which caused the offending passages to be suppressed, has intimidated later biographers into believing that the whole thing existed only in Branwell's imagination. (The effect on Mrs. Gaskell of all this unpleasantness was doubly serious: the

shock and anxiety permanently injured her health, and she was 'frightened off her nest,' as she put it, as a writer, for more than six years. She even came to the conclusion that all forms of biography were undesirable.)

We can never, perhaps, be sure ; but considering the evidence from our safer distance, we find the whole tone and detail of the episode suggesting that there *was* a love affair, and that Mrs. Robinson's denials covered a skilful retreat from a dangerous position.

Mr. Robinson, that vaguely threatening clerical figure in the background, was an elderly man and an invalid. Branwell was twenty-five when he first came to Thorp Green, Mrs. Robinson a handsome woman of forty-two. She was at an age when the admiration of youth is singularly attractive, and Branwell, having more than his share of the ardent Brontë temperament, was bound to respond to the smallest flicker of encouragement. It is not by any means an unheard-of situation, and might well have gone undiscovered until it wore itself out, like many unsuspected Victorian dramas. But Branwell was unlucky. Either Mr. Robinson found out, or else his wife, wishing to put an end to an affair which in its third year was growing irksome, made some complaint or accusation against Branwell, with the result that he was forbidden to return. Whichever happened, the last thing the Robinsons wanted was a scandal, which was exactly what Branwell's frantic behaviour eventually achieved.

Mrs. Robinson's real attitude to Branwell we shall never know ; but once the affair was known, or Mrs. Robinson's accusation made, we can readily see that it was in her interest to keep him at a distance. It seems likely that she sent him letters and money on occasion, and it is said that they even met in secret at Harrogate ; but it is hard to believe the melodramatic picture of her sufferings that we find in Branwell's letters. We can only suppose that it was at this point that the opium dreams began to colour his experience.

His confidants during these wretched months were John Brown the sexton, who was sent with him to Liverpool when he was in *delirium tremens*, and J. B. Leyland the sculptor, to whom he described the successive stages of the affair in a curious and often pathetic correspondence. It eased him to describe his sufferings to Leyland (for his sisters, and particularly Charlotte, were unresponsive) and to talk and daydream on paper about Mrs. Robinson. After her



husband's death he claimed to have received a 'long, kind and faithful' letter from her physician, which would be extremely interesting to read if it had survived. 'He knows me *well*,' he told Leyland, 'and he pities my case most sincerely, for he declared that though used to the rough ups and downs of this weary world, he shed tears from his heart when he saw the state of that lady and knew what I should feel. When he mentioned my name—she stared at him and fainted. . . . Her sensitive mind was totally wrecked. She wandered into talking of entering a nunnery . . .' It is somehow difficult to believe in this affecting scene. If Mrs. Robinson really suffered as Branwell believed, she also showed an admirable resilience, for it was not long before she became the wife of Sir Edward Scott and was reported by her daughters to be in the highest spirits. What is certain, however, is that Branwell believed in her, and brooded on his vision of her misery, and on his own torments, until he was sunk in a swamp of morbid melancholy from which nothing could save him.



In writing of Mr. Nicholls, of his long, painful, triumphant and tragic love story, Mrs. Gaskell faced a difficulty seemingly insoluble. For there he sat, in his dark little stone-floored study which had once been the store-room, and which only a year ago had been papered and curtained by Charlotte in white and green, so that what little light came in was pale and greenish, as though filtering

into a small and dark aquarium. She was so close to her subject, here, that it was frightening.

He had resisted the idea of the biography from the beginning, and had been sternly jealous of the privacy of his married life. What was Mrs. Gaskell to say about that marriage—the slow and exquisitely painful story that preceded it, the doubts that surrounded it, the fears and misgivings with which, on Charlotte's part, it had been undertaken? <sup>1</sup> Of all this, Mrs. Gaskell knew too much. The only attitude open to her was a sort of reverent reticence, an attitude upon which her natural delicacy would in any case have insisted. He would never, she knew, have countenanced her at all if he had not believed her discreet, and discretion must be the mood of her final chapters. Yet it must often have galled her, as a novelist, to have to discard so much that was profoundly moving; so much that was relevant to Charlotte's character; so much that was true.

Mrs. Gaskell herself had been in two minds about the marriage. She wished for it for Charlotte's sake, but did not care for what she had heard of Mr. Nicholls. 'I am terribly afraid he won't let her go on being intimate with us heretics. . . . I fancy him very good, but *very* stern and bigoted. . . . However, with all his bigotry and sternness it must be charming to be loved with all the strength of his heart, as she sounds to be.' With her usual perception she had sensed something in Charlotte which might even respond to this aspect of Mr. Nicholls. 'I am sure that Miss Brontë could never have borne not to be well ruled and ordered. . . . I mean that she would never have been happy but with an exacting, rigid, law-giving, passionate man.'

Mrs. Gaskell's delicacy forbade her to do more than hint at the sudden and surprising happiness which Charlotte found in marriage. It was a change that depended almost wholly on her discovery of Mr. Nicholls's character. Indeed, in the letters of those last months it is wonderful to see how, in the sudden climate of happiness, he blossoms and improves. There were no great disclosures; only the gentle unfolding of his tenderness; and the revelation, for Charlotte, of the contentment, even the rare emotional experience, which outwardly unpromising people can bestow.

No great novelist has ever devised a more tragically fitting, or more poignant ending, than the famous, the almost unbearable last passages of Mrs. Gaskell's biography. Slowly dying, Charlotte had written a last pencilled note to Ellen, crowning with one

<sup>1</sup> See *Mr. Nicholls*, by Margaret Lane (CORNHILL, Summer, 1950).



unforgettable chord the long sustained crescendo of Mr. Nicholls's love. 'I must write one line out of my dreary bed. . . . I am not going to talk of my sufferings—it would be useless and painful. I want to give you an assurance, which I know will comfort you—and that is, that I find in my husband the tenderest nurse, the kindest support, the best earthly comfort that ever woman had. His patience never fails and it is tried by sad days and broken nights. . . .'

'I do not think,' Mrs. Gaskell concluded, 'she ever wrote a line again. Long days and longer nights went by; still the same relentless nausea and faintness, and still borne on in patient trust. About the third week in March there was a change; a low wandering delirium came on; and in it she begged constantly for food and even for stimulants. She swallowed eagerly now; but it was too late. Wakening for an instant from this stupor of intelligence, she saw her husband's woe-worn face, and caught the sound of some murmured words of prayer that God would spare her. "Oh!" she whispered forth, "I am not going to die, am I? He will not separate us, we have been so happy."

'Early on Saturday morning, March 31st, the solemn tolling of Haworth church-bell spoke forth the fact of her death to the villagers who had known her from a child, and whose hearts shivered within them as they thought of the two sitting desolate and alone in the old grey house.'



## Roger Fry (1866-1934)

BY CLIVE BELL

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**A**N exhibition of Roger Fry's paintings and the republication of some of his lectures seem to have reminded my generation of a great contemporary and aroused in the young curiosity about an old master—a master critic. At least that is how I explain a request made a few months ago in New York by an American friend—'You knew Roger Fry well, why don't you give us your picture of him?' 'Because,' said I, 'Virginia Woolf wrote a biography which, besides being as complete an account of Fry's life as for the present it would be seemly to publish, happens to be a literary masterpiece: I have no notion of entering into competition with one of the best writers of my age.' Of course I knew well enough that what my friend had in mind was something utterly unlike Mrs. Woolf's biography; what he expected of me was an appetising lecture, fifty-five minutes of lively gossip, a chapter from my unpublished memoirs. But here again a lion was in the way: for though, as a matter of fact, I did jot down soon after Fry's death, for the amusement of my friends and his, a handful of anecdote, intended to illustrate just one facet of his nature—the lovably absurd, I felt that to enjoy these fantastic tales it was necessary to have known the hero and to have known him well. Now Mrs. Woolf made us know him so well that she was able to avail herself of my collection—which was of course at her service—dropping delicately here an absurdity there an extravagance with telling effect: but I am not Virginia Woolf. I cannot bring the dead to life, and so I cannot effectively retell my own stories. All I can do is to give, or try to give, the impression made on me by the man, the critic and the painter, drawing more on my recollection of what he said and did than on what he published, which is after all accessible to all and I hope familiar to most. Inevitably, for his ideas I must go sometimes to his books; but of his character and genius I will try to give an account based on what I remember of his sayings and doings.

'How did Roger Fry strike you?' That, I suppose, is the

question. It is not easily answered. That fine, old sport of analysing characters and reducing them to their component qualities or humours is out of fashion, and was, I admit, as a method, unsubtle. Still, no one who knew Roger is likely to quarrel with me if I say that some of the things that come first to mind when one thinks of him are intelligence, sweetness, ardour and sensibility ; nor I believe will it be denied that one of the first things to catch the attention of anyone who was coming acquainted with him was likely to be his prodigious and varied knowledge. To be sure, the very first thing that struck me was his appearance. He was tall—about six foot I dare say, but did not look his height. Maybe he stooped a little ; he was well made, by no means lanky, anyhow he certainly did not give the impression of a very tall man. What one noticed were his eyes which were both round and penetrating—an unusual combination—and were made to appear rounder by large circular goggles. One noticed his hair too—once black, I believe, but greyish when I met him—which, long, rebellious and silky, somehow accentuated his features which, in profile at all events, were very sharply defined. He was clean shaven. There was something the air of a judge about him, but still more the air of one who is perpetually surprised by life—as indeed he was. At moments he reminded me of a highly sagacious rocking-horse. He wore good clothes badly. Obviously they had been made by the right tailor, but there was always something wrong with them. It might be a too decorative tie fashioned out of some unlikely material, or a pair of yellow brown sandals worn when black shoes would have been appropriate. His hats were peculiar ; broad-brimmed, round, Quakerish and becoming. Only in full evening dress—white tie, white waistcoat, boiled shirt and collar—did he appear smart. Then, with his silvery hair carefully brushed, he looked infinitely distinguished.

So much for the impression made at first meeting. Acquaintance ripening to friendship, you would probably note a restless activity of mind and body. Ardent he was, as I have said, intelligent, sensitive, sweet, cultivated and erudite : these qualities and attainments revealed themselves sooner or later, and soon rather than late, to everyone who came to know him, and of them I must speak first. But what charmed his intimate friends almost as much as his rare qualities was his boundless gullibility : of that I shall speak later.

I have said that his knowledge was what might well have struck

you in the beginning. One was surprised by the amount he knew before one realised that it was a mere means to something far more precious—to culture in the best sense of the word.' Roger Fry was what Bacon calls 'a full man'; but his various erudition was only a means to thought and feeling and the enrichment of life. Knowledge he knew added immensely to the fun of the fair, enabling one to make the most of any odd fact that comes one's way by seeing it in relation to other facts and to theories and so fitting it into the great jig-saw puzzle. But he never cared much to be given a result unless he could learn how that result had been obtained; and therein you will recognise one of the essential qualifications of a scholarly critic. At Cambridge his studies had been scientific: that is something to have in mind for it helps to an understanding of the man, his merits and some of his defects. He took a first in the Natural Science tripos. To do that, I am assured, requires more than smattering a little Botany and cutting up a few frogs: to have done it is, I suspect, to have given the mind a bent which the most varied and thrilling experiences of later life will hardly rectify.

I shall ask you to bear in mind, then, that Roger Fry was a man of science by training and to some extent by temper. I shall not ask you to bear in mind that he was intelligent and lovable, because intelligence and charm are the very oil and pigment in which the picture of his life is to be painted. These qualities, I hope, will make themselves felt without demonstration as my tale proceeds. His old friends will not be surprised if I do not insist on them; what may surprise some is that I did not put first among his qualities, Sensibility. That Fry had acquired exquisite sensibility was clear to all who knew him or read his writings or listened to his lectures, and clearer still to those who worked with him. To watch, or rather catch, him—for in such matters his methods were summary—disposing of a foolish attribution, was to realise just how convincing a decision based on trained sensibility and knowledge can be. I have seen a little dealer, with all due ceremony, reverence and precaution, produce from a triply locked safe what purported to be a Raphael Madonna; I have seen Fry give it one glance or two and heard him say sweetly but firmly 'an eighteenth-century copy and a bad one at that'; and I have seen the dealer, himself for the moment convinced, fling the picture back into the safe without so much as bothering to lock the door. Such was the force of Fry's sensibility—trained sensibility supported by intelligence and knowledge. His possession of that has never

been called in question so far as I know. What perhaps he did not possess, in such abundance at all events, was that innate sensibility, that hankering after beauty, that liking for art which resembles a liking for alcohol, that 'gusto' as Hazlitt would have called it, which is the best gift of many second- and third-rate painters and of some critics even—Théophile Gautier for instance. I still remember with emotion the joy of wandering about Paris, a boy just down from Cambridge, with the Canadian, J. W. Morrice—a typical good second-rate painter (first-rate almost)—and of being made to feel beauty in the strangest places ; not in cafés and music-halls only (in those days, about 1904, the classic haunts of beauty), but on hoardings and in shop-windows, in itinerant musicians singing sentimental romances, in smart frocks and race-meetings and arias by Gounod, in penny-steamers and sunsets and military uniforms, at the *Opéra comique* even, and even at the *Comédie française*. With Roger Fry I have been privileged to travel in many parts of Europe, and from him I have learnt to discover uncharted subtleties and distinguish between fine shades of expression ; but I do not think he could have found beauty where Morrice found it. Perhaps Roger possessed in the highest degree sensibility of a methodical kind, what I have called 'trained sensibility' ; whereas Morrice had the sensibility of an artist—innate. I do not know.

His first approach to art was so hampered by family tradition, lofty and puritan, that it was I dare say inevitable that he should make some false starts and fall into some pits from which a normal, barbarous upbringing might have saved him. Also the climate of Cambridge in the 'eighties,' and even later, was not altogether favourable to growth of the æsthetic sense. Also he was reading science. All this I take into account : and all this notwithstanding I do feel, re-reading the story of his early years, that his blunders of commission and omission, his baseless enthusiasms and blind spots, were not those of a very young artist but of an intellectual at any age. Assuredly the admirations and anathemas of the very young are never to be brought up against them ; but in 1892 Fry was twenty-six and, what is more, had for some time been an art-student, which makes it hard to believe that, had sensibility been innate, he could have spent months in Paris—at Jullian's too—without getting a thrill from the Impressionists and could have found in the Luxembourg nothing more exciting than Bastien Lepage.

I spoke of family tradition lofty and puritan : the puritan strain in Roger's character his friends might like but could not ignore.



To his hours of abandon even it gave an air of revolt. His paganism was protestant—a protest against puritanism. Intellectually the freest of men, and almost indecently unprejudiced, he made one aware of a slight wrench, the ghost of a struggle, when he freed his mind to accept or condone what his forebears would have called ‘vile pleasures.’ It is on this streak of puritanism the devil’s advocate will fasten when Roger comes up, as come up he will, for canonisation. He was open-minded, but he was not fair-minded. For though, as I have said, he was magnificently unprejudiced, he was not unprincipled; and he had a way of being sure that while all his own strong feelings were principles those of others, when they happened to cross his, were unworthy prejudices. Thanks to his puritanical upbringing he could sincerely regard his principles as in some sort the will of God. From which it followed that anyone who opposed them must have said, like Satan, ‘Evil be thou my good.’ People who happened not to agree with him found this annoying.

Few of us are all of a metal; most, as Dryden puts it, are ‘dashed and brewed with lies.’ The best founded even are flawed with some disharmony. The cup is just troubled with an ‘aliquid amari,’ and the bitterness will now and then catch in the throat and spoil the flavour of life as it goes down. A tang of puritanism was in Roger’s cup: it was barely appreciable, yet to it I believe can be traced most of his defects as man and critic. Not all: there are defects that can be traced to his scientific training and temper, but here there is gain to record as well as loss. The pure unscientific æsthete is a sensationalist. He feels first: only later, if he happens to be blest—or curst—with a restless intellect, will he condescend to reason about his feelings. It would be false and silly to suggest that Roger Fry’s emotions were at the service of his theories; but he was too good a natural philosopher to enjoy seeing a theory pricked by a fact. Now the mere æsthete is for ever being bowled over by facts: the facts that upset him being as a rule works of art which according to current doctrine ought not to come off but which somehow or other do (e.g. the Houses of Parliament or the works of Kipling). The æsthete, sensationalist that he is, rather likes being knocked down by an outsider. He picks himself up and goes on his way rejoicing in an adventure. Roger Fry did not altogether like it. He entered a gallery with a generalisation in his head—a generalisation which, up to that moment, was, or should be, a complete explanation of art. He was not the man to



deny facts, and he was much too sensitive to overlook the sort I have in mind ; but I do think he was inclined to give marks to pictures which, because they were right in intention, ought to have been right in achievement, and sometimes, I think, he was rather unwilling to recognise the patent but troublesome beauty of works that seemed to be sinning against the light. Nine times out of ten this tendency towards injustice was due to a puritanical aversion from charm, and to counter it the spirit of science had made him magnificently open-minded. He was the most open-minded man I ever met. Indeed he was the only one who tried to practise that fundamental precept of science—that nothing should be assumed to be true or false until it has been put to the test. This made him willing to hear what anyone had to say even about questions on which he was a recognised authority, even though ' anyone ' might be a schoolboy or a housemaid: this also made him a champion gull—but of that later. Had he fallen in with a schoolboy—a manifestly sincere and eager schoolboy—in the Arena Chapel at Padua, and had that boy confessed that he could see no merit in the frescos, Roger would have argued the question on the spot, panel by panel. And this he would have done in no spirit of amiable complacency. Always supposing the boy to be serious and ardent, the great critic would have been attentive to the arguments and objections of the small iconoclast : convinced, I suppose, he would have modified his judgment and, if necessary, recast his æsthetic.

About that æsthetic, which gave him so much trouble, I shall soon have a word to say. But first let me give an example of open-mindedness and integrity which will, I hope, make some amends for what I have said or shall say concerning his slightly biased approach to works of art. Always he had disliked Indian art : it offended his sense of reasonableness and his taste. Late in life, having enjoyed opportunities of studying more and better examples may be, or perhaps merely having studied more happily and freely examples that were always within his reach, he changed his mind. That done, the next thing to do was to ' own up.' And ' own up ' he did in a discriminating lecture. When you remember that at the time of writing this palinode Roger Fry was getting on for seventy and was admittedly the foremost critic in Europe, I think you will agree that he gave proof of considerable open-mindedness and a lesson to us all. The scientific spirit is not without its uses in the appreciation of the fine arts : neither is character.

Indeed he was open-minded ; which is not to say, as jealous fools

were at one time fond of saying, that he was a weather-cock, slave to every gust of enthusiasm. It is a memorable fact, to which Sir Kenneth Clark sorrowfully calls attention in his preface to *Last Lectures*, that, try as he would, Fry could never bring himself greatly to admire Greek sculpture. He would have been glad to admire it: for Greek civilisation, for the Greek view and way of life, for Greek prose and verse, philosophy and science, he felt what all intelligent and well educated people must feel. He realised that Athens was man's masterpiece. And so, towards the end of his life, he went with three friends—one an accomplished Hellenist and all highly intelligent—to see whether he could not prove himself wrong. The will to admire was there; but honesty, but fidelity to his personal reaction, proved the stronger. He found Greek sculpture, whether archaic or of what is called 'the great age,' comparatively dull. And he said so.

Roger Fry was troubled by æsthetics; anyone who cares for art yet cannot keep his intellect quiet must be. Roger cared passionately, and positively enjoyed analysing his emotions: also he did it better, I think, than anyone had done it before. Having analysed he went on to account for his feelings, and got into that fix which everyone gets into who makes the attempt: *experto credite*. Art is almost as wide as life; and to invent a hypothesis which shall comprehend it may be as difficult, just as it may appear as simple, as to explain the universe. The place where Roger stuck is where we all stick. There is a constant in art just as, once upon a time, there was supposed to be a constant in life. I have a notion they called it 'C': anyhow that was a long time ago. But I feel pretty sure that in those far off days the difference between Organic and Inorganic was determined by the presence or absence of a definable somewhat; and still it is permissible to say that a work of art cannot exist unless there be present what I used to call 'significant form,' and you may call by any name you please—provided that what you mean by your name is a combination of lines and colours, or of notes, or of words, in itself moving, i.e. moving without reference to the outside world. Only, to say that, is no more to answer the question 'What is art?' than to chatter about 'C' is, or ever was, to answer the question 'What is life?' Renoir, painting pictures of girls and fruit, concentrated his attention exclusively on their forms and colours. But implicit in those forms and colours, for Renoir inseparable from them, was appetizingness—the feeling that girls are good to kiss and peaches to eat. Easy

enough to see that when a painter sets out to make you feel that his girls would be nice to kiss he ceases to be an artist and becomes a pornographer or a sentimentalist. Renoir never dreams of trying to make you feel anything of that sort ; he is concerned only with saying what he feels about forms and colours. Nevertheless, he does feel, consciously or subconsciously, embedded in those forms and colours, deliciousness. All that he feels he expresses. Now all that an artist expresses is part of his work of art. The problem is turning nasty, you perceive ; complicate it, multiply instances and diversify them, and you will be near where Roger stuck. He never quite swallowed my impetuous doctrine—Significant Form first and last, alone and all the time ; he knew too much, and such raw morsels stuck in his scientific throat. He came near swallowing it once ; but always he was trying to extend his theory to cover new difficulties—difficulties presented, not only by an acute and restless intellect, but by highly trained sensibility playing on vast experience. Need I say that his difficulties were always ahead of his explanations ? In wrestling with them he raised a number of interesting questions ; better still—far better—he threw a flood of brilliant light on art in general and on particular works. Read again that masterly chapter in *Transformations* called ‘Some Questions in Æsthetics,’ a matter of fifty pages, in which he goes deeper into the subject than anyone had gone before or has gone since—I am not forgetting Max Eastman whom I greatly admire. You will find the destructive criticism entirely satisfying ; you will be enlightened by the analysis of æsthetic experience ; you will enjoy seeing the finest mince-meat made of Mr. Richards’s simple-minded psychological explanations, which boil down to the absurd conclusion that our responses to works of art are the same as our responses to life ; and when it comes to justification let Fry speak for himself :

‘As to the value of the æsthetic emotion—it is clearly infinitely removed from those ethical values to which Tolstoy would have confined it. It seems to be as remote from actual life and its practical utilities as the most useless mathematical theorem. One can say only that those who experience it feel it to have a peculiar quality of ‘reality’ which makes it a matter of infinite importance in their lives. Any attempt I might make to explain this would probably land me in the depths of mysticism. On the edge of that gulf I stop.’ (*Vision and Design*, p. 199.)

Certainly his wrestlings helped to give muscle to the body of Fry’s criticism ; but to the building of that body went many rare

aliments—trained sensibility, intellect, peculiar knowledge, wide general culture, the scientific spirit and honour. Mrs. Woolf speaks of 'his power of making pictures real and art important.' Words could not give better a sense of just what it was Roger Fry did for my generation and the next. Having learnt to feel intensely the beauty and glory and wonder of a work of visual art ; he could, so to speak, unhook his emotion and hold it under, I will not say a microscope, but an uncommonly powerful pair of spectacles. That done, he could find, and sometimes invent, words to convey feelings and analyses of feelings into the apprehension of the reader—or listener : it was even better to be a listener than a reader. I am not thinking of those unforgettable conversations and discussions before particular works of art in churches and galleries, but of his lectures. Roger Fry's lectures were his best critical performances : he was the perfect lecturer almost. And the lecture with slides is the perfect medium for pictorial exegesis, permitting, as it does, the lecturer to bring before the eyes of his audience images of the objects about which he is speaking, thinking and feeling. To hear a lecture by Roger Fry was the next best thing to sight-seeing in his company. He stuck but loosely to his text, allowing himself to be inspired by whatever was on the screen. It was from a sensation to a word. Almost one could watch him thinking and feeling.

To say the excruciatingly difficult things Fry set himself to say he was obliged to work language pretty hard. In my opinion he worked it well. His prose was lucid and lively, and on occasions he could be delightfully witty and verbally felicitous. His biographer glances, critically but affectionately, at his habit of repeating favourite phrases. The fault is unavoidable in the prose of an art critic since there is no vocabulary of art-criticism. If such terms as 'plastic sequence,' 'plastic unity,' 'inner life,' 'structural planes' keep cropping up, that is because they are the only symbols available for subtle and complex things which themselves keep cropping up. It is essential to understanding that readers or listeners should know precisely what the critic is referring to ; and only by repeatedly describing in the same terms the same concepts can he hope to give these terms anything like generally accepted significance. To some extent the art-critic must create his own vocabulary.

Writing, as a fine art, was Roger's foible. Of prose and verse rhythms he was indistinctly aware ; but he liked spinning theories about them. Of his translations of Mallarmé the less said the

better : the one significant thing about them is that he believed them to be adequate. They have made me think of Bentley editing Milton ; for, after all, Bentley was a great, a very great, critic, and in some ways understood Greek poetry as it never had been understood by a modern. Having named Milton, I find myself thinking of some gibberish Roger once wrote—for the benefit of intimate friends only—gibberish which did possess recognisable similarity of sound with the *Ode on the Nativity* but did not possess what he firmly believed it to possess, i.e. all, or almost all, the merits of the original. The gibberish was, of course, deliberate gibberish—a collocation of sounds so far as possible without meaning. It was highly ingenious, and I am bound to reckon the theory behind it pretty, seeing that it was much the same as one I had myself propounded years earlier as an explanation of visual art. Only, at the time Roger's experiment was made, we were deep in the 'twenties' and the fine frenzy of Post-Impressionism was a thing of the past. There was now no controversial axe to grind. Simply, Roger liked the theory because he felt it was one in the eye for 'magic.' It came from the heart rather than the head and he wanted to believe it. Now it was this gibberish, and his opinion of it, and the passion with which he defended his opinion which finally opened my eyes to a truth which had, I suppose, always been plain to those who did not love him : Roger's feeling for poetry was puritanical. The charm, the romance, the imagery, the glamour, the magic offended the quaker that was in him ; wherefore he was very willing to believe that all that signified could be reduced to clean, dry bones.

Having said so much about writing and lecturing, I must say something, I suppose, about painting. It is an unenviable task ; for, preposterous as it must seem to those who know him only by his achievement, Roger Fry took his painting more seriously than he took his criticism. It was the most important thing in his life, or at any rate he thought it was. He said so, and his friends were bound to believe him : yet some of them wondered. Surely he knew that he was the best critic alive, and, at the bottom of his heart, can he have believed that he was a very good painter ? He knew that those whose opinion he valued did not think so. To me it seems that his early work, especially his water-colours and paintings on silk, are his happiest productions. They are frankly eclectic ; the influence of some master, of some English water-colourist as a rule, being acknowledged at every turn. But in most



of these works—things done before 1910 shall we say?—there are pleasing qualities which later I seek in vain. Unashamed, in those unregenerate days, he could utilise his knowledge, and exploit his taste, the delicacy of his perceptions, his sleight of hand. All these assets contributed to a tentative style which did in some sort express a part of his nature. The Post-Impressionist revolution which set free so many of his latent capacities overwhelmed these modest virtues. It set free his capacity for living and enjoying, but it did no good to his painting. On the contrary, that movement which was to liberate the creative powers of all those young and youngish artists who had powers to liberate, that movement of which in this country he was the animator, did Fry's painting harm, driving it into uncongenial ways. He tried to paint in a manner which he understood admirably and explained brilliantly but could not make his own. No longer decked in the rather antiquated finery which had fitted his temper on one side at any rate, his painting gift appeared naked, and we perceived to our dismay that it amounted to next to nothing. His very energy and quickness, qualities elsewhere profitable, here served him ill. He worked too fast. Neither had he that ruminating enjoyment which lingers over a subject till the last ooings of significance have been tasted, nor yet the patience which will elaborate a design to its last possibilities. I have seen him, out of sheer conscientiousness, or in some desperate hope of a miraculous revelation, work on at a picture to which he knew he could add nothing, for all the world like an examination-candidate who has written all he knows and vainly strives to improve the appearance of his paper by writing it all over again. Roger knew that he had added nothing. Maybe he knew too much.

Roger Fry was a good, though impatient, craftsman, proper of his hands and quick to learn a trade. His best productions in this sort are the white pots and plates he made for the Omega; and it is to be hoped that a few will be preserved in some public collection, for they grow rare. But no sooner did he think it necessary to gmbellish a chair or a table or a chest of drawers, to beautify a curtain, a lampshade or a frock, than something went wrong. There must have been a devil, I have sometimes fancied, a demon born of puritanism and pampered in young 'artistic' days, which lurked in his sub-consciousness and on favourable occasions poked up its nose. At any rate, in all that he did for the Omega, with the exception of those plain white pots and plates, I taste an unpleasant flavour—a flavour redolent of 'artistry.' That was the



devil's revenge ; and perhaps it was this same evil spirit that forbade Fry the paradise of creation. From that delectable country he was excluded ; he could not reach the frontiers because where art begins some perverse sub-consciousness or self-consciousness arrested him. What was it precisely ? I hardly know. Could he have believed—no, he could not have believed nor thought either—but could he have hoped, in some dark corner of his being inaccessible to reason, that style could be imposed ? A horrid fancy : that way lie art guilds and gowns, sandals, homespun and welfare-work, and at the end yawns an old English tea-room. If Roger had finished a picture before he had begun a work of art, that may have been because he could not practise what he preached so well—that in creating all the horses must be driven abreast, that you cannot hitch on style or beauty as an ostler used to hitch on a tracer. And if I am asked why Roger Fry's painting seems dead, all I can say is that when Renoir was asked whether art comes from the head or the heart he replied '*des couillons*.'

But if Roger Fry was not an artist, he was one of the most remarkable men of his age, besides being one of the most lovable. This his biographer has established ; his other friends can but bring a few flowers to the monument and cherish the inscription. I first met him appropriately enough in the morning train from Cambridge to King's Cross. It was early in 1910, a moment at which Fry was in a sense beginning a new life. The tragedy in which the old had ended, the courage and devotion with which that tragedy had been fought and for a while warded off, Mrs. Woolf has most movingly recounted. In 1910 Roger Fry was in his forty-fifth year : one life was ending and a new, and perhaps more exciting, about to begin. Indeed, it was a moment at which everyone felt excitement in the air : had not I—even I—just sat down to describe the general state of affairs in an *opus* to bear the pregnant title *The New Renaissance*, an *opus* of which the bit I did publish three years later, a book called *Art*, would have formed a mere chapter. Certainly there was stir : in Paris and London at all events there was a sense of things coming right, though whether what we thought was coming could properly be described as a 'renaissance' now seems to me doubtful. The question is academic : as usual the statesmen came to the rescue, and Mr. Asquith, Sir Edward Grey and M. Viviani declared war on Germany. But in 1910 only statesmen dreamed of war, and quite a number of wide-awake people imagined the good times were just round the corner.

Miracles seemed likely enough to happen ; but when Roger Fry told me that morning in the train that he proposed to show the British public the work of the newest French painters, I told him that I would be proud to help in any way I could but that his scheme was fantastic. Not that there was any question of my being of serious use—Roger never needed an *État-Major* ; but as I had written in praise of Cézanne and Gauguin and other ' revolutionaries ' he thought I might as well give a hand. Anyhow, I was put on a committee which did nothing, and late that summer I joined Roger and Desmond MacCarthy in Paris : in the autumn opened the first Post-Impressionist exhibition.

Of this exhibition and the next Fry was, as everyone knows, the original and moving spirit. At once he became the animator and advocate of the younger British painters ; but not the master. Few young painters mistook him for a master, though to him they looked for advice and encouragement and sometimes for material support. With his fine intellect, culture and persuasive ways he became spokesman for modern art—our representative in the councils of the great ; for he could place his word where he would. *The Times* felt bound to print letters from him in large type on the front page. Even fine ladies, even the Prime Ministress, had to pretend to listen. And, under the wand of the enchanter, with his looks, his voice, his infinite variety and palpable good faith, those who began to listen found themselves becoming converts. It was now, in these last years of peace, that France became for him what for the rest of his life she remained—his second country ; and there he made friends, deep, affectionate and charming, who later were to do much to lighten the gloom of declining years. At home, too, between 1910 and '14 he was making friends, some of whom were to grow into close companions and collaborators ; and of these most, it is to be noted, were of a generation younger than his own. They were, I think, gayer, more ribald, more unshockable, more pleasure-loving and less easily impressed by grave airs and fine sentiments than the friends—whom, by the way, he never lost nor ceased to love—with whom he had grown to middle age. It was from these younger people that he learnt to enjoy shamelessly almost—yes, almost. Their blissful adiabolistism helped him to ignore the nudgings of the old puritan Nick. And this I like to count some small return for all they learnt from him. He taught them much : amongst other things, by combining with an utterly disinterested and unaffected passion for art a passion for justice and

hatred of cruelty, he made them aware of the beauty of goodness. That virtue could be agreeable came as a surprise to some of us. Like all satisfactory human relationships, these new friendships were matters of give and take ; and I know who gave most. Nevertheless, between the first Post-Impressionist exhibition and the first war I have a notion that Roger Fry changed more than he had changed in all the years between Cambridge and that exhibition.

I have suggested that one reason why Roger was unable to elaborate a work of art and knocked off too many works of craft was that his boundless energy induced impatience. This energy, allied with prodigious strength of will, was terrifying ; and it is not surprising that his enemies, and his friends too when they chanced to be his victims, called him ruthless and obstinate ; for it is provoking to be driven straight into a field of standing corn because your driver cannot admit that his map may be out of date or that he may have misread it. Of this energy and wilfulness an extract from my unpublished notes may perhaps give some idea. So, ' I recall a cold and drizzling Sunday in August : I cannot be sure of the year. Roger is staying with us at Charleston, convalescent ; for, like many exceptionally robust and energetic men, Roger was a valetudinarian. I remember hearing my wife say, probably at breakfast, that she suspected him of intending to be motored some time in the afternoon to Seaford, eight or nine miles away, where dwelt his old friend, Hindley Smith ; but that she, the weather being vile, the road slippery, the car open and ill-humoured, had no intention of obliging him. Just before lunch Frances Marshall (Mrs. Ralph Partridge) who also was staying with us, and possessed, like my wife, what most would deem a will of iron, told me she had a headache and meant, the moment lunch was over, to slip off to bed, if that could be done without causing commotion. In any case she was not going to play chess with Roger. For my part I never cared about playing chess with Roger ; if, by any chance, one succeeded in some little plot for surprising his queen or rook—and setting traps is what amuses all thoroughly bad players such as I—he would dismiss the strategem as " uninteresting," retract a series of moves—generally to his own advantage—and so continue till on scientific and avowable principles he had beaten one to his satisfaction. Anyhow, on this dark and dismal Sunday, lunch finished, Roger sprang to his feet—all invalid that he was he could spring when the occasion seemed to demand action—exclaiming : " Now, Frances, for a game." And, as soon

as Frances had been allowed to lose in a way of which he could approve, again he sprang: "Now, Vanessa, we've just time to go and see Hindley Smith." Vanessa went like a lamb.'

I have spoken of Roger's open-mindedness, of his readiness to listen to anyone he thought sincere: that was fine. His aptitude for discovering sincerity in unlikely places was fine too, I suppose; but sometimes it landed him in difficulties. Not to mince words, he was a champion gull: gullibility was the laughable and lovable defect of a quality. Stories illustrating this weakness abound: one or two, which, I am proud to say, are drawn from my notes, appear in Mrs. Woolf's biography. If I venture to impose yet another on your patience, the excuse must be that it illustrates, or at least adumbrates, more than one characteristic.

The scene is laid in a studio in the south of France. It is a cold spring day and we are sitting round a stove drinking tea. Roger has received a letter; to be sure he received it several days ago and it has been kept ostentatiously secret ever since. It is from an American book and picture dealer in a small, private way of business. It is highly important and extremely confidential, but Roger must speak or burst. Well, of course the writer wanted money—a good deal of money. Why he wanted so much will appear. In Vienna, in what was rather vaguely termed 'the archives,' someone had discovered certain papers. These turned out to be no less than the secret papers of Roger Bacon—and in fact some writings of his, not in the least secret, had been unearthed several months earlier—but these *secret* papers proved beyond doubt that the admirable friar had foreseen everything—flying-machines, motor-cars, telephones, wireless, high explosives, poison gas—all the modern conveniences in short. Now for some reason not very clearly defined these documents were extremely damaging to the Papacy: also the Pope had forbidden their publication. They could be published only in the United States, and there only if some millionaire could be induced to buy them and print at his own expense. Surely Mr. Roger Fry, former adviser to the Metropolitan Museum and to Mr. Pierpont Morgan, would know of a likely purchaser. For until they were purchased these world-shaking documents could not be made public. That was clear; and even when they had been purchased they must be smuggled into America. Such is the influence of the Church.

You might have thought there were other possibilities. At that time Austria herself was a republic under social-democratic govern-

ment, as was Germany. Russia was just over the way, and there seemed no reason to suppose that something damaging to the Vatican would necessarily be banned in Moscow. Also, there was France, a land of tempered liberty, to say nothing of England. So you might have thought : you would have thought wrong. None of these countries would do : to America the precious papers must be conveyed, though at frightful personal risk and incalculable expense. There indeed they could be printed, but only if rich collectors were sufficiently public-spirited to buy them, *en bloc* or severally ; for only when they had been bought and paid for, in dollars, could the picture-dealing bookseller undertake the perilous, but for the future happiness of mankind essential, task of making their contents generally known.

Having told this long story with a long face Roger concluded that something must be done. Vainly was it suggested to him that if safety from the Inquisition were all that was needed there could be no call to go so far afield as Fifth Avenue or Wall Street : besides, was it likely the Pope would consider anything written in the thirteenth century fatal to his prestige in the twentieth ? Roger was not to be shaken. He had swallowed the tale, hook, line and sinker. The Jew was an honest Jew, manifestly the victim of priestly intrigue and powerful obscurantism. So to no purpose did I doubt whether anything Roger Bacon might be found to have said was likely to prove more difficult to get round than what had already been published by Bayle or Hume or Voltaire, or, for that matter, Darwin : in vain did I wonder why these manuscripts could not be printed till they had been sold. Roger was not impressed. Only he felt, as one could see, that we were all surprisingly unfair. Indeed he was shocked, as he admitted in a letter, that anyone as intelligent as my son, Julian, should have supported me in my notorious and stupid scepticism.

Inevitably one so gullible and so often gulled grew suspicious—not of the crooks, but of old friends and well meaning acquaintances. To make matters worse, Roger had no turn for practical psychology. A poorer judge of men I have seldom met, and it goes without saying he piqued himself on penetration. He was as ready as Rousseau to believe in *conspirations holbachiques*, and was given to explaining plots which he supposed to have been woven against him, and had in truth been woven in his own imagination, by facts and motives which his friends knew to be non-existent. Does this sound sinister ? It was not ; for his attention could be diverted



with the greatest ease from private grievances to general ideas or, better still, to particular events—in plain words to gossip. In both he delighted; also his mind was far too nimble, his capacity for enjoyment too keen, his taste too pure, his sense of fun too lively, for him to dwell long on petty troubles. He was not much like Rousseau after all. But suspicious he was, and in his fits of suspicion unjust. He could be as censorious as an ill-conditioned judge: possibly the trait was hereditary. Then it was that the puritan came out from hiding undisguised and made him believe that those who differed from him must be actuated by the foulest motives. In such moods it was that he suspected those who opposed him of having said, like Satan, 'evil be thou my good'; also, it seems to me, these moods grew more frequent with the years, bringing with them a perceptible loss of magnanimity. Or was it that some of his old friends were growing touchy? That explanation is admissible too.

In this discursive essay I hope to have given some idea of the qualities that made Roger Fry one of the most remarkable men of his age. A combination of intellect and sensibility, extensive culture not in the arts only but in history and science as well, dexterous manipulation of a fine instrument, and an unrivalled power of getting close in words to thoughts and feelings, made him indisputably our first critic. In fact he was more than the first critic of the age; so far as I can judge from my reading in three languages he was about the best writer on visual art that ever lived. There may be Russians or Germans who have responded more delicately and analysed their responses more acutely, who have contrived to come nearer the heart of the matter; if so, I shall be glad to study their works as soon as they have been translated. Add to these gifts, which were as one may say open to the public, those with which in private he charmed his friends, a playful intellect for instance, free fancy and a sense of fun, along with taste in food and wine, and you have beside a great critic a rare companion. Men I have known who possessed tempers to me more congenial, but none better equipped to please generally. His was, on the whole, a happy disposition, and a cause of happiness in others. One permanent anxiety beset him: it was the child of his virtues. He dreaded, especially during the last years of his life, the collapse of civilisation. For civilisation he cared nobly; and the prevalence of its mortal enemies—fanaticism, superstition, dogmatism, unreasonableness, the cult of violence and stupidity, contempt of



CLIVE BELL

truth and the ways of truth—dismayed him. In naming these vices I have indicated his virtues, which were their contraries. He was a man of many virtues ; what is more, in practice he contrived to make them amiable.

## The Road to Bologna

BY MARRIS MURRAY

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' Dans cette belle comparaison, dis-je, Bologne représente apparemment *l'indifférence* et Rome *l'amour parfait*.

' Quand nous sommes à Bologne, reprit madame Gherardi, nous sommes tout à fait indifférents, nous ne songeons pas à admirer d'une manière particulière la femme dont un jour peut-être nous serons amoureux à la folie . . . '

STENDHAL.—' *De l'Amour* '.

ON the fifth day of his holiday Arnold Brown, wearing bathing-trunks and a straw hat, and sitting on the beach in order to expose his skin for a short time to the annealing sunlight, told himself that he was bored. He was going through one of those intervals in life in which nothing happens, and which seem so static that it becomes possible to believe that nothing can ever happen again. It is at such times that a man may discern the monotonous pattern of his life, and realise that the motif has been the same for as long as memory can retrace it. But since nothing had yet occurred to make Arnold notice this, his boredom was not absolute : he expected it to pass. From time to time he reminded himself that a scene of great beauty was stretched around him, and that his mind should have been filled with the freshness of the wide and sparkling sea.

He had come through life successfully to the age of forty-seven ; for the last few years he had been fleshing his body up and stamping his mind down, and he was in danger of forgetting that there were experiences which he had not had. His features were good, but had it not been for the soft, almost affectionate expression in his blue eyes, would have indicated a character both proud and brutal. He made a great deal of money and had many friends, but he was spending his holiday alone in a small seaside place where he knew no one. It was not so much a holiday as a convalescence, and because of the curious nature of the illness from which he had suffered, he had had a great desire for privacy. Doctors had not been able to name his illness ; they had seemed uncertain whether

to call it a fever or a skin disease. From every part of his body, Arnold's skin had peeled away. For a week before this had happened, he had felt uncomfortable all over, as a man might feel who had not bathed nor changed his clothes for many weeks. And then, suddenly, he had been in slough. He would have liked to have ignored this uneasy occurrence but, although he seemed perfectly healthy, something unaccustomed remained : he felt as it were sensitive, and when the doctors had suggested a change, he had gone at once to the seaside. And sometimes he wondered whether another skin had replaced that which he had lost, or whether in fact he still had only six.

On the fifth day of his holiday, when it seemed to him that he knew by heart the long stretch of white sands, the façades of the lime-washed houses, and the contours of the mountains that enclosed the small bay, he was beginning to regret that he had left his work and his friends. Sitting idle on the beach, he felt self-conscious under the glances of confident young girls who passed, laughing, and showing off their sunburned bodies in fashionable bathing-suits, and he almost wished that he could have a small love-affair to give him something to think about.

A couple of yards away a younger man, whose name was Ralph Emeritus, sat on the sand, wearing a pair of yellow bathing-trunks and a straw hat, and tanning himself a dull and sullen brown. He had already spent ten days doing this, because there was nowhere that he could go and nothing that he could do. His life had reached its only, and fatal, crisis ; whether he blamed himself or others, there was nothing he could do but submit. He knew that he might just as well cease to think, and wait for events to dispose of him. But he was both timid and conscientious, so he sat on the beach and agonised, trying to see the future, asking himself again and again : Is there no way out ? What shall I do ?

The brim of his straw hat concealed his eyes, but it exposed his mouth, twisting as he groaned in the back of his throat : I've wrecked myself ; wrecked, wrecked, wrecked.

From time to time he would spring up and, running down to the water's edge, plunge into the sea, like a beast that tries to escape the torturing fly, but his misery plunged with him, making the waters as cold as ice to his nerves.

Arnold, who held an open book which he did not read, partly because he found it dull, and partly because the sunlight dazzled his eyes as it rebounded from the page, watched his fidgeting

neighbour. He saw that he was tall and well made, but he also noticed his twisting mouth and the desperation on his brow when he took off his hat before running down to the sea. Arnold felt a little curiosity, but not much; the young man was merely one among many figures on the beach from whom he did not expect originality of thought, action or appearance. Indeed he considered even himself and all his friends to be mediocrities, each getting what he could out of life, and suffering the banal ills of the mediocre. But he was unable to be altogether impartial about himself: while he knew that much of his complacency was physical vanity, yet he could not entirely rid himself of the feeling that his life had point and reason whereas, he could appreciate perfectly, the lives of those around him were mere growings and fadings, like the lives of plants.

But how else could I go on? he asked himself, and looking up, saw walking in his direction a woman whom he knew. She was wearing a brilliantly blue bathing-suit, and was accompanied by two lolloping golden spaniels. He was trying to decide whether he should break out of his sensitive solitude and speak to her, when she recognised him in spite of the anonymity of his nakedness.

'Why, Noldie!' she cried, turning towards him, 'what are you doing here?'

'I'm taking a holiday,' Arnold answered, springing upright, and found that he was delighted.

The woman who stood before him was called Vera Penstemon, and was considered something of a beauty. She had married young, but after the first year of her married life, her husband had seldom been seen with her. He had been a serious racing man, and had preferred the society of his own sex. He had died rather suddenly eighteen months ago, and it was said in Arnold's circle that she would like to marry again, for love; but no one could discover whom it was she loved. Arnold admired her clear-cut, regular features, her abundant dark brown hair, and her figure, but he fancied, perhaps with regret, that she would never disturb him, nor touch his heart.

'I've taken a house,' she told him, 'for two months. So that I can have the dogs with me. It's awkward in a hotel.'

Arnold gazed at her with pleasure. He thought he could discern a sadness behind her glowing good humour, and wondered if this were why, for the first time, he agreed with his friends in finding her to be a beauty.

While they stood talking, the young man who had been lying near Arnold returned to his towel after one of his desperate plunges. Vera called 'Ralph Emeritus!' and he came hesitatingly towards them. Vera introduced the two men: it appeared that she had known Emeritus for many years. Arnold, looking into his dark eyes, finely shaped but fugitive in movement, perceived that he was not really hearing what was being said. Screwed up, thought Arnold. Even his toes are clenched; and a feeling of intense dislike for the young man passed over him, so that his skin rose into goose pimples. But the feeling went, more quickly than the goose-pimples, and he glanced away from Emeritus with perfect indifference.

It was a very hot, still day. A causeway of white clouds was beginning to grow across the rich blue sky; the waveless surface of the sea was like a blue diamond. A swarm of children in bathing-suits ran along the water's edge, followed by some dogs, and a train whistled as it approached the level-crossing.

'Why don't we sit down?' asked Vera, sitting. 'Ralph, what are you doing now? I never see you.'

Emeritus did not answer. A fishing-boat had just been beached, and now the crew were pulling in the trek-net. A small crowd began to gather round it, and presently the fishermen were flinging the fish down upon the beach in gleaming rows.

'Oh,' Vera cried, 'I should like to take a fish home with me. Ralph, please get me a fish.'

Ralph got up and walked towards the boat. Arnold, watching him, fancied that his whole body was distorted with anxiety. He had thought him handsome but now, seeing him jerking across the sands, he wondered how soon his arms and legs would begin to hang awry upon his body, his shoulders to droop, and his chin to poke forward. Then he would be Ralph Emeritus only in shining shoes and a well-cut suit; in bathing-trunks he would be merely a figure on the beach, one of the deformed by life, the anxiety-racked, the deceived and disappointed, whom he had watched walking along the beach every day in the denuding sunlight.

He glanced sideways at Vera, and saw that her eyes were fixed on Ralph, that the pose of her head and her whole attitude seemed fixed on him, and he experienced a little private triumph, thinking: I at least know whom it is she loves, and then his triumph was spoiled by envy: No woman has ever loved me like that. He asked Vera:

THE ROAD TO BOLOGNA

'What is the matter with that chap Emeritus?'

'What do you mean—the matter?'

'He looks as though everything were torturing him.'

'Oh no, I don't think so. It's just his manner.'

'Well, of course, you know him,' Arnold said, but he thought :  
She loves him too much.

Ralph came back carrying a fish and offered it to Vera, silver, stark and huge, its dead eyes like mother-of-pearl buttons. She thanked him as though he had brought her something very precious, which perhaps he had since, having no money, he had bought it with his gold signet ring. This was not because of his feelings towards Vera, it was merely because, having lost everything, he felt that he had no more use for anything.

'I shall have to take it home now,' Vera said, regretfully.  
'Have you got a car here, Ralph?'

'No.'

'Why don't you get one?'

'No money.'

'Oh, money,' said Vera, and sighed.

'But does money matter?' Arnold asked, hoping to discover something of Ralph's opinions. He picked up a handful of sand and then let it trickle from his palm.

Ralph gave him a contemptuous look. 'Not to those who have it,' he answered.

So that's it, thought Arnold.

'Noldie,' Vera asked, 'what made you come down here?'

'A desire for solitude,' he told her, and smiled at her. He looked at Ralph. He was not attending; his fugitive eyes were running out to sea. What is he after? he wondered, or rather, what is after him?

Vera was picking up her fish. 'I must go,' she said, in her softly sighing voice. 'But I invite you both to dinner this evening. At seven-thirty. I'm living in a house called "Seabright." There, you see that squat place, fairly high up, with a black tree beside it. Don't be late.'

She didn't wait for them to answer, and Arnold thought that she was afraid that Ralph might refuse. She will clasp her expectation all day, and when only I appear, she will be overwhelming in her welcome and charm.

The two men lay side by side, propped upon their elbows, gazing at the near waters, where a red canoe was floating. Arnold



had covered his sensitive new skin with a towel, but he could feel the sun's rays striking through the cotton. A gull glided above them, and the first puffs of the rising wind blew over their bodies. Ralph turned his head a little and stared at the mountain's craggy top. He despised the man beside him. Does money matter? Fool, he thought. He didn't go away because he had nowhere to go except the narrow room that he rented above a shop. He began to feel very hungry. Presently Arnold said, 'Let's get into my car and go and look for a drink.'

Ralph said sharply, 'I have no money.'

'That's all right,' said Arnold. 'We can dress in the car. Come on.'

And because he had nowhere to go and nothing to do, Ralph got up and followed him.

Through the dirty, salt-dimmed windows of the hotel lounge they could see another beach, and people walking and running along the sands. Sunburned arms and legs appeared and disappeared in the waves, and on the easterly rocks a fisherman was kneeling, baiting his hooks. Distant mountains raised their violet heads above the sea-line.

Ralph fidgeted in his chair, his eyes flying from his drink to the window and back again. The uncared-for lounge felt chilly; the glasses of former drinkers had been left beside a dirty ash-tray; someone had burned a hole in the tablecloth. He drank in silence, but once he groaned. When he had emptied his glass for the third time, he was drunk. He leaned forward in his chair, interrupting a rather uninteresting remark which Arnold was making.

'You said money doesn't matter,' he began. His syllables were a little clotted. 'You did, didn't you? You said money doesn't matter.'

'I suppose I did,' Arnold agreed in a bored voice.

'Then you are an ass—or a millionaire.' Ralph swayed slightly. 'It matters, it matters life and death. Will you give me five thousand pounds? Of course you won't.' He began to sip his fourth drink, and suddenly he banged his glass down on the table and almost shouted:

'I can't sleep at night. I don't hear what people say to me. I not only have no money—I owe more than I can ever pay, even if I pay for the rest of my life.'

'Everyone is in debt, one way or another,' said Arnold soothingly.

'One way or another—what's that?—one way or another. I tell you, I am absolutely, finally, and fatally in debt. And there's worse.'

He was silent for a moment, staring at Arnold. He knew it would all come out. He felt he hated Arnold, but something in his eye—was it that deceptive affection?—compelled him to speak.

'There's worse. I've got my mistress with child. She's three months gone, and her husband has been away for a year. She wants to marry me.'

'So you are in debt for property as well as money.'

Ralph's eyes ran towards the dirty windows. Clouds were settling on the tops of the distant mountains. He burst out:

'How can I keep a wife and child? And I don't love her any more. I haven't loved her for a long time. Things like that become simply habit. Oh, my God. And there's no way out. In debt for the rest of my life, and tied forever to a woman whom I cannot love.'

He sat very upright in his chair and fixed his eyes on Arnold. He seemed to be waiting for Arnold's scornful criticism, but something in the older man's face reminded him suddenly of a fortune-teller whom he had once consulted, many years ago, because he had thought it would be a joke. He remembered how she had dealt out the cards, counting under her breath, and sometimes glancing at him with her round, rather stupid blue eyes. She had told him that he must be very careful with love, and she had prophesied that he would be very unhappy at some period in his life. And finally she had said, 'There is a death in the cards.' It seemed to him now that he had never really ceased to hear her words: he had purposely sought out the difficult in love, had been irresistibly drawn towards hopeless situations, as if they alone could give him the satisfaction that comes to those who perfectly fulfil their destinies. And death? Having been advised that this was his destination, had he not perhaps deliberately gone further and further up that narrow valley from which it was the only exit? Surely that had always been at the back of everything—death in the cards?

'There's no way out,' he repeated, his fugitive eyes glancing between Arnold's face and the window.

'Nevertheless,' said Arnold slowly, 'there is a way out.' He saw, like a small precise photograph in his mind, Vera's graceful, concentrated figure moving along the beach, and the spaniels rippling behind her.

'Where?'

'If you don't see it, I can't tell you. But in any case, you don't have to marry her.'

'An honourable——' began Ralph, but Arnold, closing his eyes so that only brutality was left in his face, said:

'Nonsense. Honour will make you all miserable. Besides, does honour compel you to marry a dishonourable woman?'

'Now that's intolerable!' Ralph cried. He looked at Arnold with hatred and, getting up, began to walk towards the door.

Arnold followed him. 'I'll drop you where you like,' he said, and wondered why women found his companion attractive.

He had dinner alone with Vera, and he tried not to gaze at her with too much curiosity. She behaved with so much charm that he began to think that if he were to examine her features more closely, and by a stronger light than the light of candles, he would see little muscles jumping under her skin, muscles which wanted to spread despair and disappointment across her face, and which strained against her control. He was surprised that he should imagine such a thing, since he had always believed that life was what it appeared, and kept no contradictory muscles beneath its toughened skin. He supposed that he had been disturbed by the tale Emeritus had told—and yet he had heard such tales before, in the course of forty-seven years, and had watched their sequels, undisturbed himself.

They sat on the balcony drinking coffee, lit by the stars and the distant glow of the street lamps. The wind had dropped, and in the warm stillness they could hear the long surf breaking from left to right along the sands, and its echo travelling between the mountains, like a shuttle service. Presently, Arnold became aware that Vera was crying. This goes too far, he thought, and wondered how he could quickly leave. He liked to distract a charmingly sad Vera, with her muscles in control, but a crying woman was another matter. She was still his attentive listener, laughing when she should, but sometimes the tears broke in her voice, and at last Arnold said abruptly:

'Why are you crying?'

#### THE ROAD TO BOLOGNA

'I'm sorry Noldie, it's just nerves. I think about the sadness of life sometimes, in the evenings.'

'What have you seen of the sadness of life, as you call it? You, who have always been rich, and living easily, and admired?' He did not remember as he spoke that she had lost her husband, and might now be sad, a widow. Few people did.

'Nothing, I suppose. It's just nerves. I've stopped now.'

But soon after this, Arnold went away. He was annoyed. Tears altered the situation; it was as though a voice had suddenly spoken out loud from a printed page, or one of those despised figures on the beach had turned on him and saying, 'I will tell you the story of my sickness,' had passed the pain to him. He thought of Emeritus, and as he walked along the mountain road, his eyes travelling round the lamp-fringed bay, he muttered: 'The fool. And I suppose he brought it on himself.' And he was angry that he had that morning thought that Vera might be the way out. He wondered whether he should give Ralph fifty pounds, or even a hundred, and tell him to run, to clear out and start his dismal life again in some other country.

When he was undressing in his hotel bedroom, the word dismal came into his mind again, but this time it seemed to have something to do with himself. For what after all was there in his life but a little increasing prosperity and the spectacle of the violent, ridiculous things that happened to other people? He walked over to the wardrobe to hang up his dinner jacket and, opening the door, met himself in the mirror. He looked at his firm, well-balanced body, and his handsome, insensitive face, and boredom was like the taste of sand in his mouth. He stood, holding his dinner jacket by the neck, and meeting his gentle blue eyes, he suddenly asked aloud:

'And where do I come in?'

But he had already entered.

Ralph first noticed Thompson on the day when he discovered that only a week was left to him. In a week's time the husband of his mistress was due to arrive from the interior of Africa; and in a week's time he would have to admit publicly that he could not repay the moneys which he owed. But, so deeply was he sunk in the river of his desperation, time was simply numbers on a calendar, and he seemed to live without transitions. He was either in his room, or on the beach; he was either alone, or someone was

sitting beside him. This stranger, who wore a straw hat and sometimes reminded him of Arnold, and sometimes of the fortune-teller, was always ready to begin a conversation and Ralph, who at first resented his proximity, presently found himself listening eagerly for his voice, because when he spoke he seemed to give expression to something half-grasped and lurking at the back of his own thoughts. He was thinking that perhaps the husband of his mistress would shoot him, when he heard the stranger's voice for the first time. He was saying :

'It can of course, sometimes be a happy release.'

'What can?'

'I was thinking of death.'

'Oh,' said Ralph, 'so was I.'

'But then you must have the right thoughts about it,' his companion went on. 'Look at it in the right way, and you see it's only natural.'

Ralph murmured, 'You're quite right, of course,' but his thoughts had already moved on, and he was remembering a long-passed Sunday, when he had first decided that he was in love with the woman who was later to become his mistress. It had been winter, and he had wandered for hours along a deserted beach and, continually glancing over his shoulder to make certain that he was not observed, had written 'Love, love, love,' again and again in the sand before the advancing tide.

'Look here, Thompson,' he said, but the other was not waiting for him, he was saying : 'Of course, we must remember that we are seldom to blame. Victims of circumstance, I always say. That's what we all are : victims of circumstance. Naturally, one should try to stand up to them ; it's expected of one. But it's only a gesture after all, and having made it, one is excused further responsibility.'

'I see,' said Ralph, 'and to persist in facing the music perhaps only makes it more difficult for one's partner.' As he said this, he returned to the concerto which, it seemed, he might still have time to write—'Can I leave her?' asked the violin—if only he could control the drums of the surf.

'Why does the wind blow and blow?' he asked.

'It is the trade wind,' Thompson told him. 'It blows more freely on Mondays, when the commerce of the world begins afresh, and men pursue the great abstraction from corner to corner.'

'What abstraction?'



'Money, of course. It is the God, the unreality, for which men die daily. But whatever they say, they can neither make it or lose it, lend it or borrow it, for it does not exist.'

'Of course,' said Ralph, 'I see it all now.' He saw himself that evening, eating a large dinner at an hotel where he was known, and paying for it with a cheque which would later be dishonoured.

'I'm afraid I was rude last week when you said money didn't matter.'

'Were you?' Thompson shrugged and began tapping a broken shell with a little geologist's hammer which he always carried.

He was tapping again when Ralph came to sit on the sands next day, feeling a little more robust after his large dinner of the night before. The hammer taps entered neatly into the concerto; it too seemed to be going more robustly. The melodic line followed the outline of the mountains, but the solo instrument—was it a harp? a piano? a voice?—could not impose itself upon the others. Where is the command I should have? Never to come in on the beat. . . . 'You did say your name was Thompson, didn't you?' he asked the man in the straw hat, anxiously. 'Well, look here, Thompson, why can't I come in on the beat?'

'What are you doing?'

'I'm composing a concerto.'

'Ah, but for that you need genius. We should all have genius.'

'Yes,' Ralph sighed. 'If I had had genius, turbulent and profound . . .'

'It might have got you out.'

The sand was being blown like spray across the beach. Time and distance were in the sunlight, as though beach and sea stretched back to the loneliest shores of antiquity. In this light Ralph saw Arnold's figure, malign against the pale green sea. He was strutting along, smoking a cigar under his straw hat. Ridiculous, thought Ralph, to smoke a cigar in this wind. But perhaps it was an ocarina that he was playing. At any rate, he was the man who always got the best seats, who patted Vera familiarly on the arm, who needed no excuse. He was successful, and there was gross unfairness in his success.

'Genius is allowed everything,' said the man at his side. 'It need make no gesture; it is blown through. And circumstances are arranged to further it. If you have no genius, you must find something else, some excuse. A scapegoat perhaps.'

'Thompson,' said Ralph, 'I must look for a remedy.'

'You are already too ill to take one. Can't you see that I am trying to show you the right way?'

'But it is dark already. It is too cold to sit here on the beach watching a harbour-light. I am going to bed.'

Every night, just as he was pausing on the top of the slide of sleep, Ralph half-seized, half-lost the reflection of his dream of the night before. He was standing at a cross-roads of some kind, in a brown twilight, holding in his hand something which, he could not be absolutely sure of it, was either a white china tea-cup or a small wreath of white flowers. And something was being said, but he never remembered the words. It was always the same dream, and the next morning it was forgotten.

Every day Arnold, walking along the beach, exposing his sensitive skin a little longer to the annealing sunlight, paused a short distance away from, but in front of, Ralph. He might want to speak to me, he thought. Even though I have no doubt he brought it on himself (fraudulent conversion probably) even though he brought it on himself, perhaps I ought to help him. Give him the money to clear out.

But Ralph was too preoccupied to notice him.

'Love,' he said, 'love, Thompson. Once I wrote it on the sands. But it, too, is an abstraction. The wind blew it away.'

'Love,' answered his companion, 'is not for us. We can die without it. Histories of love are like transactions on the stock exchange. And when brokers retire, they have nothing to do. It should be abolished. You may think you had love once, but you yearned over a chimera, and you will never find it again. It was only sex. And of course, that was not your fault. Chaos was tidied into the form of a phallus. We can leave love alone.'

Ralph sighed. 'How you reassure me. But then—look here, Thompson, women.'

'Oh, women,' said Thompson, tapping the heel of his boot with his hammer. 'You mustn't let them interfere. You must be able to distinguish your fate. After all, it grows up with you, like your bones and your character. You should recognise your fate as you recognise your face in the glass.'

'But people are always interfering,' Ralph complained, 'even when they are really no part of one's life. Listen, the slow movement is going well, but a woman comes along with spaniels, and they bark off the beat.'

'Oh, women,' said Thompson again. 'Women are very persistent interferers. A character in a country house once said, "Why, unless she is yours, cannot you look at a woman with indifference?" But the dramatist gave that speech to the wrong sex. It is women who cannot look at a man with indifference, until they bind him to themselves. It is women who interfere, who spoil one's fate and reduce it from tragedy to bathos.'

'Of course,' said Ralph. 'And it was not my fault. She gave me no choice, and so I really have no responsibility.' He sighed deeply and added a couple of bars to his concerto. 'But what's the good, I can never get to the end.'

'But you must,' Thompson urged him. 'What's the good of your life, except its end? Has it not always curved towards an appointed end? You should know your fate and live accordingly. Have style. Some men's only climax is to die. Very well, then, do it in the grand manner. Introduce the morbid into every speech and action. After all, when the story of your life was set down, the end was already determined. So that there is no way out. Don't let yourself be oppressed by guilt or introspection. The chief thing is to make a good end.'

'Must I do it myself?'

'No, no,' Thompson assured him, tapping with his hammer on a cardboard cigarette box, making a dull sound. 'A vehicle will be provided.'

'If only I could establish my concerto: but the soloist is given no chance. I cannot get him in on the beat. Perhaps I have lived the wrong life. But then I've only done my best to lead the life you told me was already laid down for me—laid down on the table like the cards. And death—you read that in the cards too, didn't you? Didn't you?'

'I? Oh no, I don't deal in cards.'

'Of course not—I beg your pardon. I was confusing you with a fortune-teller I once knew. But then who are you, Thompson?'

'I? Just one of those ready to oblige—to assist in a crisis. You let me into your confidence, and I show you the way out.'

'Yes, Thompson. Help me. I couldn't help myself. It was forced on me. Wasn't it? Wasn't it?'

'Yes, it was forced on you. By circumstances. As I said before, we are all victims of circumstance. Some are marked to go up, and some to go down. Some descend with the whirlpool, others

ascend on the water-spout. Just resign yourself: you are not to blame.'

'Then I can wait for it with an easy mind?'

'It is your only way. Where are you going?'

'To lie down.'

'But you will have to spend the afternoon upon the sands. Why go away now?'

'Why do you always carry a hammer?'

'For hammering.'

'I shall come back,' said Ralph, and walked away.

It was a Saturday, and the mild-looking afternoon sea was only moving a little around the edges, and there was no wind. Arnold, carrying a white china milk-jug filled with milk, which Vera had sent him to buy, since she had decided to have tea on the sands in the shelter of a rock, met Ralph where the track on to the beach crossed the railway line. Ralph stopped and said, 'Look here, you know what you were saying this morning, about making a good end?'

Arnold looked at him. His cheeks were hollow above the jaw line, his fugitive eyes were large and darkly glittering. Is he starved? Arnold wondered, and said aloud, 'But I spent the morning with Vera Penstemon. I didn't see you at all.'

'But aren't you Thompson?'

'No, my name is Brown.'

'Then who has been with me on the beach?' Ralph asked.

'Who has been talking to me?' and as he spoke, voices called:

'Emeritus, I say! Emeritus! Ralph!'

A car filled with young men drew up beside them. None of the young men, it seemed, had seen Ralph for months, and now they wanted him to go with them to watch some cricket. There was a great confusion of cries and greetings, and a racing commentary was coming from the radio in the dashboard. Ralph got into the back of the car, where three young men were already sitting, someone slammed the door, and the car began to draw away. Arnold thought again: Perhaps he is starving, and decided to ask him to dine that night with himself and Vera.

'Emeritus!' he called, 'stop a minute!' and he ran after the car, absentmindedly waving the jug, which sent a little fan of milk into the air.

'Stop!' cried the young men in the back of the car, but the

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voice of the radio shouted, 'They're off—Jumping Prince is leading!'

The young men turned round in their seats to look at Arnold, the one who was driving looked into the mirror above his eyes, and the train, its siren screaming, came down upon them as they were half-way over the level crossing. It caught the rear of the car and hurled it to one side and passed, hiding the rest from Arnold's sight.

But as the crowd collected, it seemed that no one had been hurt. The young men scrambled out, white-faced and aggressive. Ralph, however, remained lolling in the tilted back seat, with his legs higher than his head. Someone shouted:

'Come on, Ralph, you ass. Get out. It was your fault.' But Ralph stared at him and remained where he was. Another man bent his head and shoulders into the car, putting out a hand to shake him, and then drawing quickly back, burst out:

'He's dead. The silly bastard's dead. Dead, dead, dead, the silly bastard, dead.' And he went on repeating this until someone threw a child's tin bucketful of water in his face and led him to an ambulance.

Arnold could not leave Vera alone. How charming she is, he thought, and then shook his head and frowned, trying to shake off the guilt that disturbed his contemplation of her charm. He wanted to be honest, and if indeed he had been responsible for the accident, he would have to admit it, not perhaps to Vera, but certainly to himself. If he had not called and waved the milk-jug, they might not have slackened speed, they might have beaten the train. Or, if he had taken Ralph at once by the arm and led him to the smooth rock where Vera was sitting, Ralph might still be alive. And Arnold felt that his sensitive new skin was twitching and wrinkling like the sea under a rising wind, or like the hide of an animal on which flies are alighting.

But after all, he thought, he brought it on himself. Death was his best, perhaps his only, solution. But the problem, for the others, remained exactly the same. Who would pay the money that was owed, who would father the unborn child? I can do nothing, anyhow, I do not even know the woman's name. She may be a charming woman, like Vera, one whom I would have liked to help. Now, I shall never know what happens. It is a closed incident—and after all, how should it concern me?

He sat at sunset on the parapet of Vera's balcony, and told her that Ralph had been killed in the accident at the level-crossing that afternoon.

'I didn't speak of it when I came back to you with only half a jug of milk. I couldn't, then. It upset me, although I hardly knew the man. But he was an old friend of yours. I'm sorry, Vera.'

While he spoke, his eyes were fixed on her face. Perhaps he wanted to see it harden into deepest, most inconsolable grief; perhaps he hoped to see merely the sorrow of a friend, to show him that his guess had been wrong. But Vera shut her eyes and sat with no expression at all on her face, turning a glass round and round on the little table at her side.

How strong she is, thought Arnold. Or was I entirely mistaken when I thought she loved him? And a brutal desire to find out sent the blood to his head, so that he turned away and looked out over the sea in case, opening her eyes, she should notice his crimson forehead. As he gazed at the sea, he asked himself with anger what had happened to his detachment. He might, before his illness, have felt some curiosity about a woman's reactions, but had she concealed them as Vera was doing now, he would have turned away with indifference. What is it, he asked himself, what is it that has brought me to this madness of interest?

At the inquest, it was disclosed that Ralph had died from a blow on the spine, just at the base of the neck, such a blow as might have been delivered by a hammer. Arnold, telling Vera about this, said, 'He must have died instantly; there could have been no pain or fear.'

Vera said presently, 'You know you asked me once whether something was the matter with him. I thought the question ridiculous, but now I wonder. He used to sit on the beach for hours, talking to himself. Do you think, Noldie, do you think he knew he was going to die?'

Arnold was shocked. 'Of course not. Don't tell me you believe in premonitions. I think his affairs were in bad order, and I expect he worried. That's all.'

But he thought: If it had lasted longer, he might have killed himself. Then I should have been to blame. He told me, and I didn't help him. All the same, he was nothing to me, there was no call for me to act. Why should I have an uneasy conscience? He thought of the day when he had first met Ralph, when he had



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looked at his misery with detachment. If it had not been for Vera, he would have had nothing to do with Ralph. Yes, it was Vera of course, drawing him in, linking them up. And suddenly he felt tired, as though he had made a very long journey from that morning of boredom and indifference at the beginning of his holiday. Here I am, and I cannot leave Vera alone. He stared in front of him, and against the background of the leaves of the melkbo's tree, he saw again the clear day of Ralph's funeral. The wind had been blowing the sand over the lonely cemetery, and the sound of the surf had come with it. Half a dozen men had stood around the grave, and half a dozen wreaths had borne cards with the names of the men upon them. But the seventh wreath, the finest, had been anonymous. Who had sent it? Arnold had wondered. Had it come from Vera, or from the other woman, who was now alone with her husband? Half-shutting his eyes against the blowing sand, Arnold had thought with pity of the other woman, and it had seemed to him that Ralph, bare, wiped out, forgotten, had left nothing behind him but a feeling of insecurity, like the shifting sand. It was as though he had been a weak plank in the pallisade of life, that the forces of destruction had split, and through which they now thrust in to threaten all around. But who, but which, had sent the wreath of white roses?

He took Vera out every day. Sometimes they drove inland, sometimes round the blue and surf-bound coasts. He told her about his mysterious illness, and the uneasy feeling he had when he remembered that he had lost a skin. Vera laughed at him: 'Perhaps it is a way of renewing your youth. And in any case, you don't lose a skin.'

Arnold had to agree with her. But still, he felt sensitive, and often caught himself searching for other meanings beneath the banal speech and gestures of those around him. And on the Sunday after Ralph's funeral, when he was driving Vera down a country road, he suddenly thought that she was being unusually charming and gentle with him. Perhaps, he told himself, it is because she thinks I was disappointed because she wouldn't come out with me yesterday. She is making it up to me. This idea angered him, and he drove in sullen silence for the rest of the afternoon, and on the next day kept away from Vera. He did not even look up, as he left his hotel, at the white house on the mountainside, which had become so much a part of his association with Vera that it

almost seemed a charming house. His face wore a sullen expression, and as he walked along the edge of the sea, clambering over rocks and watching the swell that was studded, near the shore, with buttons of foam and seaweed berries, he muttered: I to be disappointed because a woman won't come out with me! Regretful perhaps, but disappointed to the extent of having to have it made up? I am not a small boy. He sat all evening on the stoep of his hotel, looking over the glistening sea, and frowning, and next morning, when he met Vera on the beach, walking in her bright blue bathing-suit, with her two spaniels pulling on their leashes, he looked at her in silence.

'Surely I know you well enough, Noldie,' she said, 'for you to tell me if anything is wrong? Are you ill? Or is something worrying you?'

Arnold thought to himself: Worrying me. That's it. Of course something is worrying me. I am in love with her. It seemed to him that he stood like a post on the flat white beach, unable to speak or move, while his set, confident life was being splintered into fragments like a crystal under a hammer. The wind flapped the tails of his dressing-gown and his long morning shadow stretched up the sand on his left, pointing to a mountain peak that was like a woman's breast. 'Vera,' he said, and he thought he saw a ripple of fear cross her face.

'Couldn't we drive to another beach this afternoon?' she asked.

In the afternoon, Arnold's spirits rose. He felt that the splinters of his life might grow together again, in another form. He and Vera sat on a huge rock that was almost white with age and sun-flakes. The waves of centuries had left their scalloped pattern on its granite slope, and were now beginning to break upon it with the rising tide. Other rocks, as pale, but less immense, formed a small cove in which a motor boat was anchored. Beyond the cove the sunlight, striking from the west, made a patch of white fire on the sea. Vera did not look at Arnold when he spoke to her; she shaded her eyes with her hand and gazed at the silhouettes of the mountains that reared up, grey behind the dazzling waters, and holding clouds in their interjacent valleys. Arnold felt that his voice must be as meaningless and lulling as the slapping of waves against a boat. He had only one thing to say to Vera, and that he dared not say. So he talked on and on, about his work, about sport, about weight and mass and mathematics and the habits of

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birds. But his deepest attention was fixed on what went on in another part of his mind: an eldless murmur of love.

Behind them the windows of houses which stood deep in the green foliage of the mountainside were wide open to the sunlight, while the houses themselves seemed extraordinarily peaceful, as though no questions ever disturbed them, as though their inmates were tranquil and unchanging, living like trees in an afternoon splendour.

Arnold said: 'Wouldn't it be good, Vera, to live in one of those houses, removed but not remote. One could have time for everything.'

'What do you mean by everything?'

'I suppose I mean love,' said Arnold, and felt his whole skin quiver.

'I've got over that,' Vera's voice sounded bored. 'Suppose we go and have tea somewhere.'

When he was driving her home, Arnold tried again. 'In one of those houses, one would have a change, all the time. I mean the view would always be different as the wind changed, and the tide, and the time of year. But inside, one would be undisturbed. It might even be possible to do without the telephone. The kind of life one could lead there——'

'Would be so different from the one you have always lived, Noldie, that I cannot imagine your enduring it for more than a fortnight. What about your work and your clubs and your golf and your drinking parties? What about gambling in gold and rushing off at weekends to shoot buck? You'd go crazy with boredom.'

But Arnold, looking through the windscreen at the pale evening sea, felt that none of these things would ever interest him again.

It took him a week to tell Vera that he loved her. He had always lived in a noisy and rather fast society, but the sophistication he had acquired had left him at the moment when, standing in the wind on the beach, he had admitted to himself that he was in love. The ready-made sentences of lust were of no use now, and his heart, for many years unpractised in affection, could give him no others. And whenever he thought he might begin, Vera slipped away like a reflection of sunset from the eastern sky. He began to wonder whether she knew what he was trying to say, and was determined not to hear him. I, who thought myself so able, a social poker-player, can no longer hide my feelings. But have I ever had

feelings like this before? As a young man once, yes, once as a very young man. But behind me now is the weight of living, and before me the threat of dying. How can I hide my feelings?

He climbed the mountainside to Vera's house and, knocking, heard her calling to him to come in. He felt his heart beat as though he had been running, and before he went in to the house he looked around and down, at the far, still mountains, at the flat sea, and the small dark figures of people who were still walking along the beach. All the sunlight had gone, and a clock in Vera's house was striking seven.

Four hours later he said: 'Vera, I love you.'

Vera shivered a little, and turned her head from side to side as though she were looking for an object to take hold of and cling on to. 'Please Noldie, give me that shawl.'

He brought her her shawl of blue wool, very pale and fine, and, wrapping it round her shoulders, bent his head to kiss her. His handsome features were no longer brutal, they seemed about to disintegrate, to break down into some entirely different arrangement; it was a moment when happiness might have transformed him, a moment from which his features, until they slipped back into the old habit, might have been reset into the lines of grace. But Vera bent away from him, crying:

'Don't, please don't!'

Arnold walked to the opposite side of the room and stood looking at a pallid and distorted painting which hung on the wall beside the piano. It was entitled 'Malay Quarter,' but Arnold looked at the words as though they were from an unknown language. Presently he turned round. 'Vera, I must, I must tell you how I love you, how much, how strongly. I am not a young man, I don't fall in love like this to pass the time. I don't know why, after so many years of friendship, I should suddenly fall in love with you—but Vera, Vera . . .' and he realised that he was begging.

Vera would give him nothing. 'No, no, Noldie. Please. Don't go on.' But he could not stop, although Vera was trembling and almost in tears, and although a voice murmured below his eloquence: You will regret this.

At midnight he went away. As he shut the outer door behind him, one of Vera's spaniels, which had been put out of the house for some misbehaviour, and which had spent the evening whining on the door step, squirmed against his legs. Arnold stooped as though to pat the dog, and then, straightening himself, he kicked

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it viciously and hurried down the mountainside. The sound of its howling followed him.

For two days he kept away from the shabby white house on the mountainside, but the image of it was constantly before his inner eye. The faded curtains, the creaking chairs, and the squat melkbos tree which shaded the western windows were, in that image, transformed, as though they were filled with the grace and beauty of the woman who lived with them, and were ready to give him the tenderness which she would not. He thought of all the different hours of the day at which he had visited the house, and he gathered his courage to go there again. After all, he told himself, she said nothing final, and the other man is dead. He thought he pitied Ralph, but suddenly he saw again, like a small precise photograph, Vera's pose upon the beach, on the day when Ralph had walked across the sands to buy her a fish, and he knew that he hated him. The bastard, he thought, he has wrecked my life as well. For it seemed to him that no matter what happened, he would never escape from the pain in which he then was clamped.

When he went into the sitting-room, he saw Vera by the open window. She was looking over the dark bay, but when the maid shut the door behind him, she turned her head, and it seemed to him that in that slow, hesitating and timid movement was expressed some deep and tragic sentence which, if he were only able to read it, would make clear for him the whole mystery of women.

While he stood in the middle of the room, unable to speak, Vera remarked in a low voice: 'I suppose this is the first time you haven't been able to get what you wanted?'

'I have never wanted anything as I want this. Vera, this is love.'

He saw that the line of sorrow beneath her eyes, which had first made him agree that she was indeed a beauty, was now a dark shadow, which darkened as she spoke.

'Why should I give you love? What claim have you to my love? It is given already?'

Arnold burst out: 'Are all women like this? A man would leave the dead alone.'

'What do you mean?'

His voice was loud with anger. 'Vera, Vera, I know whom it is you love. Cut your losses, Vera.'

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away to the window, asking in a low voice: 'Why do you always talk like someone on

the stock exchange?' and she added, in a careless tone: 'How should I stop loving him?'

Arnold began walking round and round the room. He was struggling with a voice that said: Tell her everything. Tell her about the other woman and the unborn child and the load of debt. Why must one respect the disreputable dead?

Vera sat with her head turned towards the dark bay, and Arnold sat on a small hard arm-chair and watched her, and it seemed to him that they were both waiting in silence and resentment for the clock to strike the hour of crisis.

At last Vera said: 'What are you waiting for?'

'For your answer.'

'What do you mean? My answer to what? Have you asked me a question?'

'You know I have been asking you to marry me.'

Vera's resentment made her tremble. 'You know I love someone else,' she said, in a loud tone. 'Why can't you leave me alone?'

'But he is dead. Dead, I tell you; and in any case, he was never worth your love.'

'Don't you think that that is for me to decide?'

Arnold was walking round and round the room again. He spoke in gasps, as though he were running.

'No, no, Vera, it is not. Why should I allow him to wreck my life by taking your love? He was no good, Vera, no good at all. He was the lover of a married woman, whom he did not love. She is going to bear his child. He told me this. And he told me that he was so deep in debt that he could never recover. Even if he had lived, he would never have been any good to you, Vera.'

His face seemed to be creasing into lines of brutality and self-pity, but his feelings were simply those of anger and shame.

Vera said nothing. Arnold ceased walking around the room and sat down again on the small hard arm-chair, and picked up a book. He held it upside down, and watched it shaking in his hands. The clock on the bookshelf filled the room with a loud ticking. He almost shouted: 'Forgive me. Vera, forgive me. I am mad and brutal. But I love you.'

'Please go away, Arnold,' she said.

At the door he stopped. 'I shall always love you. I shall always want you to marry me. Everyday, silently, I shall ask you again.'



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There were clouds in the sky, soft-looking, and gently radiant from the light of the full moon. White houses shone softly like clouds, and suddenly some cocks began crowing. All his life, long after he had forgotten the pain of that moment, whenever he heard a cock crow in the moonlight, Arnold turned pale and his whole body was filled with a sensation of suffering.

The next morning a note was delivered to him while he was having breakfast in the dining-room of his hotel.

'Dear Noldie,' Vera wrote. 'If you are still asking me, I will marry you. I see I have been a fool. Vera.'

Arnold, having read this note, folded it very carefully and returned it to its envelope. He poured out a cup of coffee and sat staring at a piece of toast. He felt as stolid as a block of wood. He had had his crisis, the agony of the night before had gone, and now that he could have what he had wanted more than anything else in the world, he was unmoved. I was too old, he told himself. I was like an old man trying to run a race, and I have used up all my heart in one short sprint. I ran too hard, too fast. My love is all used up, and now I must marry Vera.

He finished his coffee, and left the dining-room. And as he walked up the mountainside to the shabby white house with the melkbos tree, to kiss Vera with the gentle kiss of those who are altogether indifferent, he murmured: 'It will be a fiasco. God help me, this marriage will be a fiasco.'

## Elizabeth Barrett and her Brother

*'For we were nursed upon the self-same hill'*

BY BETTY MILLER

THE picture of the impetuous young Elizabeth of Hope End days is so different from that of the 'religious hermit' of Wimpole Street, that it is difficult, at times, to reconcile one with the other. Robert Browning, we imagine, was more entertained than alarmed by Miss Barrett's assertion that passion—'the good open passion which lies on the floor and kicks'—was 'the born weakness of my own nature': how could he be expected to believe that even in childhood the gentle Ba had 'upset all the chairs and tables and thrown the books about the room in a fury'?

Elizabeth Barrett, however, was speaking the simple truth about herself. Such 'demonstrations,' she added, 'were all done by the "light of other days"': and it is through those refracted beams that we are permitted, now, to discover the vehement quality of a child small enough to 'take refuge from the cruelties of the world in a *hat-box*,' and determined enough to assert by physical force if necessary her right to absolute dominion in the nursery. 'I was always of a determined, if thwarted violent disposition,' she wrote at the age of fourteen.<sup>1</sup> 'My actions and temper were infinitely more inflexible at three years old than now at fourteen. At that early age I can perfectly remember reigning in the Nursery and being renowned amongst the servants for self-love and excessive passion.' The desire, however, that there should be 'no UPSTART to dispute my authority' suffered an early setback, since the usurper had already appeared: Mr. Moulton Barrett's first son, Edward, the 'crown of his house' and focus of his patriarchal pride. It must have been about the time that the newcomer was taking his first, tenderly applauded steps across the nursery floor that the 'excessive passion' of the dispossessed became manifest in Elizabeth: and as the years went by, the privileges accorded to his masculinity aroused in one 'inconsolable for not being born

<sup>1</sup> *Glimpses into My Own Life and Literary Character. Hitherto Unpublished Poems, etc.* Bibliophile Society, Boston.

a man,' a tempestuous 'spirit of emulation.' The delicately built girl with the eager eyes and the dark cropped hair became an uncontrollable tomboy: 'much more wild and much more mad' than any of her brothers and sisters. Despite her hated petticoats, no wall was too high for her to climb, no ladder too steep, no tree too perilous: she was ready to jump out of the ground floor window in order to stand bareheaded beneath a heavy downfall of rain: to throw off her shoes and stockings and wade in the dew, or plunge herself headlong 'into a bath of long wet grass.' Refusing contemptuously the embroidery and the hem-stitching proposed to her sisters, she refused, too, the offices of the governess engaged for their instruction. Edward was to have a tutor: Edward was to learn Greek: scorning that 'subserviency of opinion which is generally considered necessary to feminine softness,' she insisted on sharing with her brother the benefit of Mr. McSwiney's Latin and Greek. As a small child, she had once cried 'very heartily for half an hour because I did not understand Greek.' Translating into intellectual force the ardour of her own emotions ('At twelve . . . metaphysics were my highest delight and after having read a page from Locke my mind not only felt edified but exalted'), she became now a confirmed pedant: and the woman who wrote in 1838 that she did not like the 'constant carrying about of an intellect rampant, like a crest,' may have been thinking of her own early years; years of stress in which the conduct of daily life was governed by 'a steady indignation against nature who made me a woman, and a determinate resolution to dress up in men's clothes as soon as ever I was free of the nursery, and go into the world "to seek my fortune."' <sup>1</sup>

It was impossible, of course, to go out into the world, even to become, as she wished to be, 'poor Lord Byron's page.' The gates of Hope End remained securely shut, protecting its inhabitants alike from the intrusion of neighbours and the temptations of a world 'where vices roam.' Nevertheless, the moment was fast approaching in which a necessity from within was to force those gates apart. 'Bro' was nearly thirteen: it was time, Mr. Barrett decided, that his son and heir should attend a public school. On a long-remembered morning in April, 1820, the lodge gates of Hope End opened to permit a small round-faced boy to pass through them, carriage-bound for London and his first term at Charterhouse:

<sup>1</sup> Dated July 22. Unpublished letter to Miss Mitford. Wellesley College Library.

after which, the gates closed themselves resolutely once more upon the less privileged members of a highly sequestered community. The effect upon Ba of this enforced separation was a curious one. In the midst of the anguish, duly celebrated in verse, 'of Bidding Farewell to My Beloved Bro,' she was seized with a passionate anxiety for the moral welfare of one remote, now, from the restraining influence of Hope End. Haunting the mind of the adolescent girl was 'the laugh of dissipation': in all earnestness, mixing tears and exclamation marks, she implored her absent brother not to 'stray from the path of honorable rectitude!': to 'spare that heart which your degradation would break!' 'Grant,' she wrote in her autobiography-cum-diary, 'Grant my Father that ere I beheld my beloved Brother! my valued friend whose upright and pure principles my soul now glories in, deviating from honour, I may have breathed my last sigh and preserve the ideal vision of his virtue to my grave!' What could not, however, be confided to the diary was the sense, bitter and deep, of her own frustration. So far, her insistence on sharing the privileges of her brother had been successful: now, however, summarily, the real difference in their station was brought home to her, for she who had followed with him the ascending incline of Mr. McSwiney's tuition—'Together many a minute did we wile On Horace' page, or Maro's sweeter lore'—could not follow him through the gates of Hope End; could not follow him into the world of men where he belonged. 'The Dream has faded—it is o'er,' she wrote. It was the dream of equality, of feminine emancipation, first ignited in her relationship with Bro and powerfully re-fuelled, at the age of twelve, by Mary Wollstonecraft and *The Rights of Woman*.

The marked change that came over Elizabeth must be dated from this time; when, together with the continued absence of Bro she had to accept in herself the inescapable realities of her own femininity. 'My character,' she wrote in her fifteenth year, 'is still as proud, as wilful, as impatient of controul [*sic*], as impetuous, but Thanks be to God it is restrained. I have acquired a command of myself which has become so habitual that my disposition appears to my friends to have undergone a revolution. But,' she was compelled to add, 'to myself it is well known that the same violent inclinations are in my inmost heart and that altho' habitual restraint has become almost a part of myself yet were I once to lose the rigid rein I might again be hurled with

Phaeton far from everything human . . . everything reasonable !'

She did not 'lose the rigid rein': on the other hand, when the anniversary of Bro's first parting came round and it was time for him to return once more to school, Elizabeth lay on her bed, the subject of prolonged and spectacular paroxysms of pain: the hourly centre of her parents' attention and anxiety. ('When I was ill,' she later wrote, 'my father and mother, during two years, scarcely ever left me to go anywhere, not even to dine in the neighbourhood,—tho' I was in *immediate danger* for only a *few months*.')<sup>1</sup> It was, however, neither an injury to the spine nor 'a common cold striking on an insubstantial frame' which, as she afterwards claimed, 'began my bodily troubles.' That Elizabeth Barrett's long history of 'bodily troubles' began, and under the circumstances described, with a persistent 'pain in the head,' we know from the evidence of her doctor, one of three called on that occasion into consultation on her case. ('The mind,' observed one of them, 'has ceased in a great degree to engage in those investigations and pursuits which formerly constituted its greatest delight, and there appears to be a degree of listlessness . . . even where the affections are concerned.') <sup>2</sup> What emerges clearly enough from their several reports is the fact that the case of Miss Barrett—'that prodigy in intellectual power and acquirements !'<sup>3</sup>—was equally puzzling to all three of them. Thus, we find Dr. Carden suggesting a 'cold shower bath' and the use of a 'tight flannel binder round the abdomen':<sup>4</sup> Dr. Nuttall, talking darkly of 'flatus', and attributing the root of the evil to the 'dyspeptic complaints'<sup>5</sup> natural to her age: while Dr. Coker, who is candid enough to admit, after an examination, that 'the positive proofs are wanting of the existence of a diseased spine' is not ashamed to put forward the suggestion that, all else failing, it might be as well, under the circumstances, to treat 'Miss Barrett's case as for diseased spine.'<sup>6</sup>

Miss Barrett was acquiescent. Whatever the treatment proposed, it could only establish the strength of her own position: a position in which she was required to resign all domestic duties to others and blandly to ignore her sister's pointed references to 'the most useless person in the house.' The privileges of frailty,

<sup>1</sup> June 6, 1828. To H. S. Boyd. Wellesley College Library.

<sup>2</sup> June 24, 1821. Dr. William Coker to Dr. Nuttall. Illinois University Library.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> May 8, 1821. Dr. Carden to — Barrett, Esq. *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> [1821] Dr. Nuttall to Elizabeth Barrett. *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> June 24, 1821. Dr. Coker to Dr. Nuttall. *Ibid.*

she discovered, were too rewarding to be lightly relinquished. Six years later, the former tomboy was writing languidly in reply to an enquiry about her health that 'deficiency in strength makes me quite incapable of much exertion.' By this time, of course, Edward had already left school: brother and sister were reunited beneath the domes and spires of Hope End. But with the passage of the years, there had come also a corresponding change in the relationship. The tenderness on both sides remained as imperative as before; but in Ba's case the 'rage for power' that had accompanied her early affections had been, if not resolved, at least re-absorbed. So deeply, indeed, had that hidden rivalry been buried that she was ready to deny its very existence. As she had once prayed to be allowed to preserve 'the ideal vision of his virtue,' so she now perpetuated a no less ideal vision of her brother's perfections. 'Oh, my beloved friend,' she wrote to Miss Mitford a year after Edward's death: '—there was no harsh word, no unkind look—never from my babyhood till I stood alone. A leaf never shook till the tree fell. The shade was over me softly till it fell.'<sup>1</sup> We are offered, however, through another source, a more convincing glimpse of the early life of Hope End. 'Now, my darling child,' wrote Ba's grandmother reprovingly, 'you must allow me to say I think you are too *big* to attempt fighting with Bro. He might give you an *unlucky* Blow on your *Neck* which might be serious to you. He is strong and powerful. I have seen him very rude and boisterous to you and Harry. [Henrietta]. He is now a big Boy, fit only to associate with Boys, *not Girls*.'<sup>2</sup> The days of fisticuffs, of open competition were over: the 'violent inclinations,' which it took so much energy to subdue, lay buried now in the 'darksome pit' of memory; never again to be uncovered or acknowledged. But if Elizabeth Barrett was reluctant after the age of fourteen to commit herself to the candour of prose, her poetry offers us an indirect but no less illuminating commentary upon the nature of her own predicament. Amongst the 'fugitive poems' published in 1833, with *An Essay on Mind*, is 'A Fragment' called *The Tempest*. Prefaced by a quotation from Lucan, *Mors erat ante oculos*, this poem was written during the emotional turmoil

<sup>1</sup> Torquay, June 14, 1841. Wellesley College Library.

<sup>2</sup> Undated. To Elizabeth from Mrs. Moulton. University of Illinois Library. With this letter, shocked, apparently, by Ba's lack of modesty, her grandmother sends her 'six slips to wear under your frocks, you are now too big to go without them.'



either preceding or following upon the departure from Hope End and her own final dissociation from the scenes and circumstances of her childhood. Heavily charged in mood and phrase, the poem opens with a description of a violent thunderstorm in the Malvern Hills; during the course of which a tree is stripped and blasted by lightning. (The same tree, apparently, as twelve years later she was to describe so vividly in a letter to Robert Browning.) *The Tempest* is written in the first person, and we can recognise clearly the voice and temperament of the young Elizabeth in one whose spirit is 'gladden'd, as with wine, To hear the iron rain'; who, exulting in the display of violence, runs 'along the bowing woods to meet The riding Tempest.' In a lurid flash of lightning she is arrested suddenly by 'a white and corpse-like heap Stretch'd in the path.' Despite the exclamation—'I knew that face—His, who did hate me,—his, whom I did hate!'—the identity of the dead is not revealed; but long arrears of emotion are uncovered in the laconic phrase which follows. 'The man was my familiar.' And as she looks at that dead face, open to the 'white unblenching breath' of the storm, a reversal of mood takes place in which exaltation is quenched like a taper 'in a pit Wherein the vapour-witches weirdly reign In charge of darkness.'

I no longer knew  
Silence from sound, but wandered far away  
Into the deep Eleusis of mine heart,  
To learn its secret things. When arm'd foes  
Meet on one deck with impulse violent,  
The vessel quakes thro' all her oaken ribs,  
And shivers in the sea; so with mine heart:  
For there had battled in her solitudes,  
Contrary spirits; sympathy with power,  
And stooping unto power;—the energy  
And passiveness,—the thunder and the death!

Day dawns at last: she awakens from a 'deep unslumb'ring dream.'

Within me was a nameless thought: it closed  
The Janus of my soul on echoing hinge,  
And said 'Peace!' with a voice like War's.

And as the speaker in another curious poem, *Night and the Merry Man*, hastens to bury before the break of day the secrets of his own past, so now, with 'feverish strength' she digs with her bare hands a grave for the un-named dead.

BETTY MILLER

I gave it to the silence and the pit,  
And strew'd the heavy earth on all : and then—  
I—I, whose hands had formed that silent house,—  
I could not look thereon, but turned and wept !

Seven years later, Edward Moulton Barrett was drowned while yachting in Babbacombe Bay. The effect upon his sister, who was responsible for his presence in Torquay, was catastrophic. 'Oh my dearest friend—' she afterwards wrote to Miss Mitford. 'That was a very near escape from madness, absolute hopeless madness—For more than three months I could not read—could understand little that was said to me. The mind seemed to myself broken up into fragments. And even after the long dark spectral trains, the staring infantine faces, had gone back from my bed—to *understand*, to hold on to one thought for more than a moment, remained impossible.'<sup>1</sup> Lying rigid and tearless beneath 'the blanching vertical eyeglare of the absolute Heavens,' she waited to die in her turn : it was against her own will, as she felt, and through the agency of the morphine which she could never afterwards dispense with, that, after months and years of convalescence, she recovered a small measure of bodily strength. What she was never to recover was peace of mind. The past, she wrote, 'has left its mark with me for ever.' To the end of her life, there was 'one face which never ceases to be present with me' : there was one name which she could not bring herself either to write down or to speak aloud. Even in the intimacy of marriage, she confessed, she could not speak out, 'in a whisper, even, what is in me.' Nor could she tolerate, from another's lips, the slightest reference to the subject. 'Once at the Baths of Lucca I was literally nearly struck down to the ground by a single word said in all kindness by a friend whom I had not seen for ten years. The blue sky reeled over me, and I caught at something, not to fall.'

But the vigilance which sought, with so fanatical an insistence, to keep Edward's name unspoken, uninvoked, could not withhold his presence from her poetry. The passions and rivalries of Hope End emerge, startlingly, in *Aurora Leigh*, a novel-poem in blank verse published when Elizabeth Barrett Browning was fifty. Into this 'fictitious autobiography,' said the poetess, 'I have put much of myself' : and if she has also put into it much that is gleaned, involuntarily, from the field of contemporary fiction, *Jane Eyre*

<sup>1</sup> Undated. Wellesley College Library.

ELIZABETH BARRETT AND HER BROTHER

and *The Blithedale Romance* included, the opening sections of the poem, at least, derive wholly from the circumstances of her own early life at Hope End. The bookish young Aurora is loved by her cousin, Romney Leigh. Wrapped up, however, in his own political theories, Romney is a man who 'sees a woman as the complement of his sex merely': he dismisses, slightly, the pretensions of Aurora, of any woman, to become a major poet.

You write as well . . . and ill . . . upon the whole,  
As other women. If as well, what then?  
If even a little better, . . . still, what then?  
We want the Best in art now, or no art.

This airy dismissal draws down upon Romney's head the deep-laid fury of the woman scorned, not in her feminine, but in her artistic capacity. Passionately—'I too have my vocation'—Aurora refuses to marry the man whose contempt so belittles and humbles her. It is Romney, however, who at the end of a very long story indeed is humbled; and most effectively so: not only is he forced to acknowledge his cousin's poetic genius, but, Job-like, he has to endure the resounding failure of his own social experiment, to witness the destruction of his ancestral home, and to accept the culminating affliction of a sudden and irreparable loss of sight. His 'calm, grand eyes, extinguished in a storm,' the erstwhile proud man turns to his cousin, and in an act of long-delayed abnegation and reconciliation—'I yield, you have conquered'—he beseeches Aurora to take over where he, through his own folly, has failed.

Shine out for two, Aurora, and fulfil  
My falling-short that must be!

At the age of fourteen, it had once pleased Elizabeth to select from *Lycidas* a text on which to base her *Verses to my Brother*. Twenty-one years later Edward Barrett was drowned at sea: and although "'not with my hand but heart" I was the cause or occasion of that misery,' his sister was ready to discover in the manner of his death the recoil of her own original intention. 'May God turn back the evil of me!' is an exclamation whose recurrence, in her early letters to him, was to puzzle and distress Robert Browning. This grief, this remorse, was never to lose its bitterness: year in, year out, she wrote, it 'comes back on me like a retreating wave, going and coming again.' In 1857, a few years before her death: 'The griefs that are incurable' wrote Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'are those which have our own sins festering in them.'

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